HOUSE
FOR
SALE
ELISSA LANDI
e woman looks with wistful retrospective
s upon the familiar landmarks of her life.

HOUSE FOR SALE

A Novel

BY

ELISSA LANDI

So sad, so strange
The days that are no more

MCMXXXII

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TO

ELIZABETH MURRAY

POET AND NOVELIST

HOUSE FOR SALE

CHAPTER I

ALL day it had been raining. The straggling, untidy sprays of ivy outside the former nursery window had been washed almost to a state of cleanliness; the road and pavement shone like black oilcloth under the yellow light of the street lamps in the quiet street below. Along the main road, at the corner, swift and brightly lit cars sped their occupants homeward after their daily battle of wits in the city. The mother, Elsa, stood at the old nursery window musing; she fingered the blind cord absently, gazing with unseeing eyes over the neighbouring roof tops. The cat used to play with the blind cord; Job, her own particular cat, standing on his hind legs, his forepaws extended in a wild endeavour to capture the tassel.

Suddenly she woke herself from her daydream, blinked and saw what lay before her eyes; to-night she would take in this view once more, as if to print it forever in her memory. Somewhat foolishly she would look out of every window in this house, whose walls were saturated with her history and had witnessed every early exploit of her children. Before the morrow she would pay a visit to each article of

furniture, caress the merest ornament, for the house had been sold and was shortly to be evacuated. For the last time was she mistress of a house, the keystone of a family; presently she would join the ranks of the new middle-aged women and, without responsibilities, spend the remainder of her days travelling on the Continent, unharassed by thoughts of rates and taxes, free, after years of toil, to live her own life and do her will. And now, at the last moment, she marvelled to think that it was herself who had brought this great change in her life.

A great melancholy stole over her. She imagined the walls covered in a cipher of which she alone held the key; the table and chair legs were marked for her in peculiar characters bearing evidence of many a kick and scratch from schoolboy boots. On the armchair was an ink stain, a relic of her daughter Helen's tenth Christmas, when Helen, the family poetess, had received her first fountain pen, and Helen's little brother Oliver had tried to show her how to fill it.

A cardboard box of cigarettes on the low mantelshelf brought back to her vividly Helen's early poems: they had all been written on those slips of glossy paper found between layers of cigarettes. Her mother had kept these early manuscripts carefully. Helen, at the age of eight, had been of an extremely melancholy turn of mind, and her efforts, invariably in free verse ("Very blank verse, Mum-

mie, I'm afraid!"), consisted mainly of epitaphs to imaginary lovers. The child used to climb onto the chair by her father's desk, in his study, write her four-lined lament and return it dutifully to the cigarette box. In the evenings the father would discover the piece of verse and show it proudly to the mother. Nowadays Helen smoked the same brand of cigarette as that in which her father had indulged during her childhood, but she no longer used the layer paper for literary purposes. Indeed, Helen had not written any verse for quite a long time. Slowly, as she matured, she had discovered that the standard of perfection in writing was expected to advance with one's years, and that knowledge somewhat damped her ardour in the pursuit of her muse. She could now just as easily command admiration by her appearance. Her baby sister Kitting had become in recent years so brilliant a competitor in the field of mental energy that Helen had retired from it completely and become engaged to be married to Jack. . . . And Kitting, merry, solid-headed Kitting, flamed on, achieving minor triumph after minor triumph, her career a series of well modulated scales, while Helen's entire life appeared to be without development, a sequence of arpeggios in the dominant seventh. . . .

Of what avail to pretend that I am not writing about myself? It is I who am Elsa, the mother, and

I mean to describe the life I have led in this house. In these pages I shall tell about Helen, Katherine and Oliver, my children; about James, my husband, and about all our friends, including Christopher and Janet M.: in short, about all that we have lived through in this house. Here James and I came when we were married, in the days when I was still trying not to give up being a pianist. James had a small private income; there was enough money to keep us both, but not sufficient with which to indulge in any form of luxury. All I could earn would be of the greatest assistance. Those were the days when it did not look well for the wife of a self-respecting young man to earn money, and we thought ourselves a most modern and go-ahead young couple to be working in this independent fashion. James seemed to me both a hero and an angel to allow me thus to pursue my musical career, and I actually gave one recital after my marriage. After that, Helen was born, and I was unable to practise enough for concert playing, but for a short time I gave a few lessons to friends of ours, for which I was paid. James, a very bright young man with an easy pen, was then making headway in a newspaper office. In his spare time he wrote very highbrow articles and an occasional novel. I admired him immensely. It pleased me that my music helped and inspired him; he worked very hard, and so did I; but in the evenings when he was able to pursue his hobby, I was unable

to indulge in mine, for I had to help our little servant to clear away the remains of the evening meal, and there were always household sewing and mending to which to attend. After my last recital I practised the piano less and less. James was sorry about that and affectionately scolded me for neglecting my music, but did not seem to be able to think of anything to prevent me from doing so. He, for his part, incarcerated himself in his little study in the most religious manner and allowed nothing to disturb him at his work.

Of course the house was too big for us. Cora, the young maid, and I had to work all day to keep it in order. The top floor had been left undecorated and was shut up, but even so, the basement, ground, and first floors exceeded our needs. It was indeed a case of fools rushing in where angels fear to tread, but I dared not complain for fear of the obvious though mildly spoken question: "Why didn't you say the house was too big for us in the beginning, dear?" My only plea could have been that of youth and the fact that I did not know any better; but realizing that ignorance is never accepted as an excuse on such occasions, I held my tongue and did not court a snub by voicing my growing alarm. In addition to my cowardliness, I felt a very decided disinclination to upset my young husband. He was so very kind and gay and charming, and in small matters so considerate, I should have felt mean. His entire

peace of mind would most certainly have crumbled away had he, however reluctantly, been forced to admit that it was originally founded on the drudgery of his best beloved, that all was not quite well with her. And all certainly was not quite well.

I am finding it difficult to write of that period with detachment. A hundred and one little incidents and remembered emotions come crowding into my head, clamouring to be related and expressed. I find that here, almost in the opening pages of my narrative, the smooth waters of my married life already appear ruffled by the winds of discontent. Yet, although our house was too big for us, I was really very happy. I am shy; have always been shy, of describing my happiness. Why that is so I cannot explain, for I have never attempted to analyze the cause of this shyness. All I know is that I must conquer it if I am to tell my story properly. I was deeply in love with James and he with me. He found me either so interesting or amusing that he wrote about me in one of his novels: the principal character was a tall, slim young woman with masses of light brown hair, a regular profile—and a great gift for music. His friends recognized me and smiled. It was so charming, our ménage, especially, as before we had become engaged, James had been considered a bit of a cynic with rather too analytical a brain, and austere tastes in art and literature which had to be sternly hidden in the interests of bread and butter.

Nowadays he wrote almost prettily. Apart from my devotion to him, I appreciated his qualities. He never raised his voice, he never interrupted, he had excellent manners, he was gentle and humorous. He always got his own way. He had a manner of getting it first and then apologizing for it afterwards; for, as I said, he was unfailingly polite. If ever I was annoyed, or upbraided him in any way, he would listen quietly, a still, immobile smile on his face, until I had finished, and then take me in his arms, kiss me, and, often as not, ask my forgiveness.

What jolly times we had together! On Cora's evenings out he would help me to lay the table and then clear away and wash up, and he turned on my bath, and we warmed each other's slippers, and we laughed and romped a great deal, and whispered and made love, and at times, being somewhat "advanced" and extremely young, we would tell one another slightly improper stories and thereby feel oddly intimate and equal, as if I were one of his own sex, capable of taking a broad, manly view of things. We were grand playmates until one day it dawned on me that our games were invariably of his choosing and at his own times and places. He treated me then as in later years Kitting treated her elder sister Helen. It would be unfair to say he intentionally dominated me, for too much was taken for granted between us to admit of such an interpretation of our relationship. I did not rebel. There would have

been nothing to rebel against. James would have smiled and soothed me and, while apologizing for whatever sin he may have committed, would have pointed out that I had but to command him anything, and I would be obeyed. "Darling, do you want me to give up writing? If you want me to, I'll even do that." "No, but I want to go on playing the piano, and I can't while there are all the responsibilities of this house——" "Darling, I'm heartbroken, but what can we do? Here we are. And we really needn't have had this house if you hadn't agreed to it at the time." To comfort me, he once promised to help a little with the housework before he left for the office in the mornings, and a little in the evenings with accounts and bills. He kept his promise for almost a week, but one morning he overslept and would have been late, and therefore was unable to help me in the making of the bed. He kissed me hastily but nevertheless affectionately, threw on his coat, muffler, and hat, and departed, clamouring for pardon over his shoulder. The same evening he returned with great news: an article of his had been accepted, and he had been asked to write a whole series for a certain journal. We were most elated, and, I remember, drank some wine with our dinner in celebration. After dinner James retired and started work on the new article. I began to realize that any career other than the one I had recently embarked upon, namely that of James's

wife, and the mother of his children, was suspended for an indefinite period. It was bound to be so for economic reasons alone. James's hobby was fast growing into a profession; his writings could be turned into money, and we needed money, whereas my piano-playing was more or less of an artistic luxury, bringing in no revenue to speak of. I consoled myself with the thought that when we were richer we could afford another maid, and thus I would have more time to myself. And shortly after this Helen was born, and owing to James's writing, we were able to afford a nurse. What could I say now? How could I fight for my music, petulantly request sauce when I was being so generously served with Life's meat and drink? On the one side I had my dear, hard-working, honest husband, and on the other my own beloved baby, and I was deliriously happy, for I possessed everything a woman could wish for. And in the drawing room my grand piano was slowly getting out of tune. . . .

After I rose from childbed I grew indolent. If only my husband had sneered a little at me for my indolence, if only he had insisted more on my entertaining him with my playing, he might have helped me out of my slough of inactivity. In the evenings he would say: "I'd ask you to play, darling, if I didn't know how tired you must be." Alas! I ought to have been firmer with myself. Instead I asked for nothing better than to baby-worship, or talk to

James. The trouble was that James was, in himself, too entertaining, too witty a companion, and I succumbed to the temptation of listening to him, discussing with him; he enjoyed my company, my outlook, he liked talking to me; indeed, it was this wonderful friendship that made ours such a happy (and modern) marriage; but it was this same friendship that proved so fatal to my art. Talking to me seemed to clear his head; it made him arrange his ideas, formulate his opinions. I was useful to him in his work. He was a hindrance to mine.

In a pathetically short time my baby became Helen, a person. Helen, my daughter, has all her life been a mystery to me and to everyone around her. I do not know her. I do not know whether she loves me or not, whether she has indeed ever loved anyone, whether she has any depth of character, whether she is, in a sense, a "mystic," or is just lamentably shallow. I cannot believe she is shallow. She was, as a tiny tot, too sweet to me—and to Kitting. Indeed, as I write here, I want to cry out for forgiveness to her, my poor, lonely Helen, for she certainly did love Kitting; all that has ever been the matter with her *is* Kitting, the fact that her younger sister romped on ahead of her. While Helen loved and admired her sister, she was tormented out of endurance by envy of her gifts and her vitality. Helen was easily the loveliest of my children, with her shining gold-brown curls, the

warm pink colour beneath her soft brown cheeks, and her enormous deep-blue melancholy eyes. Her clothes always looked dainty on her; from her babyhood she was exquisite and neat. Somehow, she did not crumple her dresses in the usual manner of infants. She had as a child the prettiest conceits: I taught her to curtsy when she shook hands with her elders, and she did it delightfully, gravely, and with pleasure. She was seldom really naughty, but from the first she had an irrepressible sense of the dramatic that sometimes involved her in the oddest of situations. She lied astonishingly. Her lying has baffled all those who have known her. Is it because of Kitting? A sense of inferiority which prompts her to make herself out to be the heroine of the most incredibly exciting yarns? Pieces of startling news are produced solely to turn their narrator into a momentary centre of attraction. It is as if some strange part of her exclaimed: "I *will* have attention, I will, I will! by hook or by crook! I *will* be talked about and talked to, not always, always Kitting. Confound Kitting, why can't I be like her, have her gifts, her power, her ability to be interesting? Nobody loves me as Kitting is loved! I *will* do something about it!"

Oh, Helen, I have tried so hard, and now I yearn over you and pray for your happiness. Will you ever be truly happy, my Helen, with your perpetual unrest, your seeking after sensation, your desire to

impress? Alas, you are too beautiful and too charming for anyone else to trouble about you as I have done; your acquaintances are amused and charmed by you until they find out those great, glaring faults that lie in two garish stripes across your soul—your sense of melodrama and your indolence—and then, laughing lightly, they cease to take you seriously. It needs a great love to heal you, and no man will, can possibly, love you in that way, beyond your beauty and your charm, beyond your pretty voice, your delightfully cultured and pleasing ways, right down to your soul, there to tear up all that is evil in you, in the very act, perhaps, destroying your love for him. I have one great fear. It is that people will put up with you as an acquaintance because of your obvious qualities, and neglect you as a friend owing to your faults, and you will always be lonely. Will your life be forever a sham? One long, rather pretty and meaningless dream from which you will occasionally awaken, and finding yourself alone, suddenly stretch out your hand in fearful apprehension, hoping to clutch at some friend in the darkness? What anxiety you have caused me! As I write here a queer emotion catches me at the throat, and my eyes are blinded so that I cannot see the page. I cannot help crying a little over you, Helen, my first-born, my pretty one, fat, pudgy-fisted, crowing, pink thing. I see you lying on your back on my lap, before your bath, kicking your naked round dimpled

legs into the air, gurgling joyfully, sweet smelling and adorable, my first baby. . . . I have lost this Helen forever, and yet I can still find glimpses of her in the big, melancholy, haughty, lazy Helen, my elegant twenty-three-year-old soon-to-be-married daughter. . . .

James, in due course, became the literary critic of the *Sunday Guardian* and of a weekly pictorial called the *Illustrated Gazette*. He was kept very busy. It was an almost unique position for a man of his age. By the time our second child was born, our finances had improved so considerably that we could afford to have the second floor of our house decorated and turned into nurseries. We also engaged a house-parlourmaid, and Cora was relegated to the kitchen.

Our second child was Katherine. "Little Kitten!" Nurse addressed the white, woolly bundle, and "Ickle Kitting" Helen echoed in a crooning voice, and "Kitting" she remained.

The gods have been kind to Kitting, so kind that I can scarcely trust myself to write about her, and I am afraid to write about her, too, because she is so much my life and soul, so much *me*. While Helen seems to have inherited many of my faults, together with many of James's, her virtues alone derived from some totally obscure source, I can trace all

Kitting's good points to both of us, and only her bad ones appear to hail out of the blue. She has all James's perseverance, his sense of balance and humour, his quickness of wit, steadfastness, loyalty. She has my temperament, my idealism, perhaps. Against all these qualities, she is impatient, shockingly irresponsible, a trifle inconsiderate at times, and nervous as a race horse. But never, like Helen, is she remote, melancholy, or spiritually helpless. Neither, unfortunately, is she reliable when requested to perform some quite ordinary or practical duty. Helen, that mass of inaccurate or invented information, is immeasurably her superior in the management of everyday affairs. Helen will deliver messages, not always correctly, it is true, but she will deliver them, none the less. Helen will go shopping for me and return with the requisite number of parcels, and if she has forgotten any one article will promptly lie about it. Which reminds me of a story about her.

I once sent her out shopping when she was ten years old. Among other purchases she was to bring me some ribbon from a local draper's shop at which I ran an account. She came home without the ribbon. When I pointed this out to her, she replied glibly: "Oh, they haven't any, you know. I asked."

"Haven't any? What do you mean? I got some like it last week."

"Oh, yes—ah, last week! But haven't you heard?

What, you haven't heard? Why, their warehouse burned down the day before yesterday, before the new stock could be sent out——"

"Helen!"

Helen protested, shrugged her shoulders desperately, complaining with gloom that no one ever believed her, and she didn't know why, and went off by herself to write a mournful poem, beginning:

A daisy had a heart of gold,
But heavy, heedless, careless feet
Crushed it in a trample bold . . .

Many of her poems were like that. "Trample bold" to make a rhyme. She seemed incapable of taking any trouble with her brain. It ran to and fro, backwards and forwards, between fact and fiction, time and space. Things came and hovered, thoughts, ideas and hard actualities squashed higgeldy-piggeldy into her mind. Nothing was disciplined, combed out, weeded. No one will deny that for a child of ten, the fancy of the Daisy with the Heart of Gold, even if a trifle hackneyed, is pretty. But would she develop it, respect it? Not she. It came, it paused in its flight on a perch in her brain, then went the way of the burning warehouse.

Five years later she wrote her last poem.

Cooler than the shady pine
Is my lady's hand in mine;

Whiter than the winter snow
Is my lady's pallid brow;
Sweeter than the purple thyme
Is my lady's voice sublime.

Colder than the icy peaks
Are the words my lady speaks;
Cooler than the death I court
Is my cruel lady's sport;
Dearer than the smiles she gave
Is my longing for the grave.

She wrote it in half an hour, out of her head, straight onto the two pieces of cigarette paper that invariably formed her manuscript. James, delighted, suggested that, to perfect it, she should alter the last couplet of the first verse, but she never did. At the time I had but one misgiving: as to whether it was really she who had written the poem. She had written it, but with a little assistance from Janet M., Kitting's "bosom" friend, who was somewhat of an infant prodigy. Kitting was very proud of her sister. I can still picture her as she often stood, blushing with pleasure, in her usual tomboyish attitudes, legs apart, arms folded. If only I could write about Kitting without seeming to wax enthusiastic or exaggerate! If only I could say that, because she was, from her earliest schooldays, such a remarkable mathematician, that she was hard or unsexed; she was not. I should, no doubt, add a note of artistic justice and impersonality to my

pæan about her if I confessed that owing to her boyishness she was a hoyden; that because of her scientific brain and her abominable lack of memory for poetry she lacked a sense of beauty; that her level-headedness drove out womanliness and tenderness. It was not so. She had grace and poise. She had artistic sense, and she possessed not only an extraordinary talent for cooking, but also a knack for handling the very young. Her memory was criminally poor for anything but facts, faces, and figures. She was at the top of her form for arithmetic her first year, and in her second term top in both arithmetic and geometry. Her Latin was not bad, her French poor (it has always hurt me to think that any child of mine should have such a bad ear as to mispronounce the French language as she did). She played the piano with confidence and taste, her eyes inevitably glued to the music, for, of course, she could not execute a single phrase by heart. She was not pretty, like Helen, but she had a fresh, round, pink face, very fair, rather lifeless hair, and intelligent gray eyes with becoming brown lashes. Her nose was too fleshy, and, for some reason, suffered from pinkness. At times it almost matched her cheeks. Her mouth was wide and rosy, and her teeth white and healthy looking but a trifle unevenly spaced, rather like an animal's. At the age of six her baby brother Oliver contrived to remove three of her front teeth at a single blow—with a cricket

ball; and for an alarmingly long period no second teeth appeared. It was at just about this time that she fell off the sooty tree in that oblong plot at the back of the house which we are pleased to call the garden, and fractured her kneecap. She never gave herself a chance to recover, fell on it and twisted it time and time again, and has in consequence impaired it for life. She now walks with a slight limp, but if I may be permitted to say so—her limp suits her, it is part of her. Many are the mornings I have watched her lately from the old nursery window off to college, her attaché-case in her hand, limping slightly, her nose and chin tilted upwards (another bad habit of hers) as she walked down the road. Always, when she reached the corner, she turned round and waved to me. Then on again towards the ominbus stop, limping slightly, Kitting head-in-air.

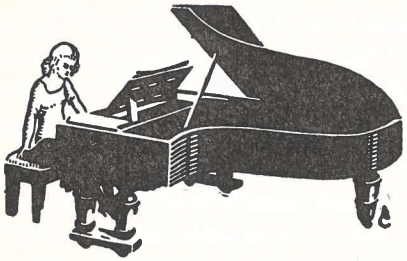
Then Oliver. A beautiful, bouncing baby, the image of James, barely a year after the advent of Kitting. Kitting's inseparable and devoted companion, an easy, simple, normal child. He went through his typical boy's childhood in the most orthodox manner imaginable, doing what all boys do, until he was fifteen and ran religion in harness with "rugger." At three he was a horse, at five he was a tent dweller (in bed, with blankets tossed off, lying on his back with one perpendicular leg supporting the sheet like a tent pole), at seven a ticket collector or postman or Red Indian or cowboy; but

at ten he was an engineer—and so was Kitting. Together they built bridges and castles and towers and great steel cranes and elevators; later they had a kind of embryonic wireless telegraphy, and once, I don't know how, they fused the lights of the entire house between them. They arranged a corner of Oliver's bedroom as a kind of laboratory and spent hours there messing about with all manner of things, from dead frogs and live tadpoles to small quantities of mercury which Oliver had stolen from school or emptied out of the family thermometers. Kitting was intensely keen about chemistry, and Oliver, who followed her like a lamb, thought he was. Later he took to cinema going and spent his half holidays with his friends inside the local cinema, eagerly following a serial film entitled "The Black Rider of Shadow Valley." He felt the deepest admiration for a film actor called William S. Hart, and for Mr. Hart's beautiful horse, who acted with him in all his plays. Oliver liked cricket, but he liked football better. My son's appearance seems to me now, in retrospect, to have been composed of dirty (and sometimes gory) knees, exceptionally grimy hands, and torn knickers. ("Well, look here, Mum, there was the beastly nail, and here was I—so. You see, it wasn't my fault, now, was it? Somehow the nail caught me just *there*.") And then, because James had always wanted it, Oliver went to a public school. That altered him. Somehow the devilry departed

from him; he began to have reserves from Kitting and me. I cannot quite explain, but a touch of sentimentality, of false nobility appeared to invade him. I had always imagined that a public school made boys hearty, hardened them; but my personal experience proved to be the reverse. Oliver came back in the holidays with "codes" and strange moral standards of right and wrong, virtue and vice. I set to work hard to exert my influence; I had to use it subtly, secretly, for Oliver was not dense, and any suspicion of mental combat would have put him on his guard at once and made him obstinate. In a short while my labours were rewarded, Oliver recovered his sense of humour and his own personality, and by the time he went to Oxford, was himself again. A new self, however, a self that deliberately chose Oxford, not Cambridge; that chose classical and not modern subjects; a self that, however merry, was fond of reading serious books, and of woodcuts and etchings, of drawings and of writing essays.

Yes, I am pleased with Oliver. He is a good boy and is doing well, and when he comes down from Oxford next year he is probably going into Peabody and Hootes', the publishers. Old Hootes loves him —because of James. . . . I have no fear for Oliver. Fortunately for him, he lacks the grand manner of Helen; her magnificent laziness and disregard for detail; her air of *"Si nous mourrons, mourrons*

*propremen*t"; he is without the energy and ambition of Kitting, her wild enthusiasm. He is content to be content, and a good thing too. A very nice fellow is Oliver.



CHAPTER II

AS I write here, I see once again James as I first knew him, and then James as he returned to me from the war. I close my eyes, and there comes to me a vision of the young James seated in his study, frowning over his work, somewhat conscious of the taste and comfort of the room. "Er—my study," he would say with a suspicion of childish pomposity and satisfaction, coughing a little, "my study. . . ."

The walls had always been custard-colour, and the woodwork painted streakily to represent oak. The hangings and carpet, as soon as we could afford a certain amount of elegance, had been of royal blue; the furniture oak or walnut. A large, desiccated leather armchair, which I had picked up for thirty shillings at a sale, had stood near the fireplace in the old days. Its covering had been apt to peel off like dead skin, and was completely roughened in places where the cat had been in the habit of sharpening its claws. That article of furniture was superseded by a sofa when we grew more prosperous. James used the room constantly, and only deserted it at meal times or when he was out of the house.

Latterly he even had his luncheon brought to him there on a tray. . . .

And now I am, alas, unable to banish my memory of James's study as I last saw it, with its fresh-looking patches on the faded wall, where the pictures and a certain eighteenth-century framed map have been removed. The patches are still custard-colour whereas the rest of the wall has turned a pale and dirty straw. The bookshelves, which are built in as fixtures on each side of the low chimneypiece, grin bonily at one like lifeless, fleshless skeletons, for our books have been packed into cases and now repose in the attic of Helen's new house.

There are few sights so melancholy and detestable to me as empty bookshelves. From my earliest childhood, empty bookshelves have spelt dire poverty to me, either of money or of mind. Unfurnished, even dilapidated houses have never in the least affected me, for there always appeared to exist a variety of reasons, not at all pathetic, why people should postpone the decorating of their rooms. But I am convinced that no man or woman of intelligence ever failed to unpack his books if he had shelves of any description in which to place them. There are, however, other reasons for empty shelves.

Which takes me back to my girlhood.

My father was a violinist, and like a great many musicians, we never had much money. In order to earn a few extra pounds, he used to "arrange" a

certain amount of piano music for the violin. He also composed a few very charming songs, which my mother, with her pretty untrained voice, used to sing quite sweetly. I was evidently a prodigy, for I made my *début* at the age of twelve, and my parents were very proud of me. Father and I used to play together a lot in the evenings, while Mother sat by and did needlework. Poor mother! She it was who bore the brunt of our struggle against circumstances. My rare playing in public was, of course, almost entirely for glory, for my music master would not allow my people to accept any contracts for me, but made me work very hard against a future date when I should mature as a fully fledged pianist. I was really made to play in public at the time merely to test my nerve. My father died when I was sixteen, leaving unpaid a number of bills which he had incurred in my mother's name. Six months after his death a well-known draper's store and our local county council put the bailiffs into our house because their account and the water-rates were so long overdue. I remember my mother was out shopping that day. I sat at home practising when the front door bell summoned me. I answered it and was faced by two shabby middle-aged gentlemen.

"Is this the 'ouse of Mrs. ——?" asked one of them, a timid, fat little man.

"Well—what do you want?" I was, I confess, on the *qui vive* as I already happened to be quite

accustomed to putting off rate collectors and tradesmen.

"Does Mrs. —— live 'ere?" he insisted.

I had to admit that she did, in fact, live here, and he produced a "norder of the court" and insisted upon entering. Thereupon one of the shabby gentlemen proceeded to take an inventory of every single article in the house. I was nonplussed. They informed me that if my mother did not pay up within a fortnight we would be sold up under the hammer. One of the gentlemen (the sheriff's officer of the county court) was to be our unwanted guest until the order was put into execution, whereas the other man, after he had taken the full inventory, was to depart. Our guest was a sandy-haired, mild fellow, who held his office with a sub-air of constant regret. My mother returned and duly burst into tears of despair, while I, who felt myself to be the man of the family, tried to puzzle out some plan by which to defeat the law—for to appease it I felt to be impossible. Our books, thought I, must at all costs be saved. We had some very beautiful books which had belonged to my grandfather, a member of the famous Osti quartette, and volumes of music with personal dedications to members of our family, signed by Mendelssohn and Liszt. These, at least, I was determined should not be sacrificed.

I had a plan.

"Those books," I said, as the man took down the

list, "are not my mother's or mine. They belong to a friend."

The man eyed me suspiciously. "My hinstructions are to make a full hinventory of heverything on the premises," he replied. " 'ooever howns these books must go and make a special claim. I hadvise the person to remove them as soon as 'e's made the claim, to avoid confusion."

The following day I took into my confidence a girl at the musical college, called Bella Sanding.

"Bella," I said, "my mother and I are in the soup. The bailiffs are in and are going to pinch everything and sell it. We're ruined for want of £200. They can have every stick of the furniture—it's all beastly rotten old stuff anyway—but they shan't have the books. Bella, I make you a present of *all* our books. They're yours, Bella. Only, for God's sake, go and claim them at once."

"What?" cried Bella.

"They're yours, on one condition: that I'm allowed to buy the lot back from you whenever I want to for the sum of £50."

Bella understood, and, of course, insisted that she must be allowed to give and not sell the books back to me when I should want them again. She was a true friend and went to all the trouble of claiming them. When questioned as to why they were at my house and not her own, she said I was storing them for her, because she had not the accommodation for

such valuable books in her own house. A few days later every volume was removed to Bella Sanding's house. We thought it safer.

And that was my first experience of empty bookshelves. . . .

The sheriff's officer was a most unobtrusive little man. He was supposed to spend the night in our house, and he received eight shillings per day, but he had the greatest sympathy for "two pore ladies," and used to leave, surreptitiously, at about nine o'clock at night and return again the next day at about 7 A. M. "It's surprising," he used to say, "the 'ouses I've been to. You'd never believe it." He was always bristling with the desire to be indiscreet, but fortunately for the inhabitants of those " 'ouses" he never so far forgot himself as to mention any names. On the following afternoon, Tuesday, I played at an "afternoon" given by the Baroness T——, wife of a well known Jewish financier. She was an Austrian Jewess and very stylish; (we called women "stylish," "distinguished" and "elegant" in those days. Kitting, nowadays, says "smart," "trim" and "sheek" for *chic*—when she wishes to be complimentary). The Baroness attempted to have a *salon* (vain endeavour in London), and obviously felt that to achieve this she must patronize the arts and have protégées. I, thank goodness, was one of her protégées. I say "thank goodness" because she was of a generous disposition and al-

ways made me a present of five guineas or so when I played for her. On this memorable occasion there was present one Francis Kennedy, an American of about thirty-two years of age, a director of the Harmonophone Gramophone Company, who was in a short time to play such an important rôle in my life. Gramophones and motorcars were to us then what airships and radios are to us now. We were still very excited about them as quite recent inventions.

To cut a long story short, Mr. Kennedy took me up. He gave me an introduction to his firm, which resulted in a recording test.

I get so unutterably bored with this writing, with having to record the dull parts of my history in order that the more exciting bits can stand out in relief. In taking this journey back to my early youth, I should like to leap from mountain peak to mountain peak and not re-tread plains which I find monotonous. The period of which I am writing is a confusion in my mind of pictures and places and scenes, a jumble of facts and emotions, and I am supposed to sort them all out and turn this conglomeration into a narrative. I know that I ate and slept (badly), and there were tiny hard sticky knobs on the black London trees that would soon burst into leaf. When I hurried through the streets, carrying my music case, the air was hot and damp, and I sweated a little so that my clothes clung to me and my hair stuck to my forehead. When I was

warm and damp and breathless I had pink cheeks, which made me look pretty. I noticed this when I caught sight of myself in the mirrors in shop windows. I was in love. Oh, how I was in love! I was sixteen years old, and the spring was in the air, and I worshipped my benefactor, Francis Kennedy. Francis Kennedy said "I guess" and "gotten," and sat in a red-leather armchair and called me "little woman" on the day I went to see him, trembling all over, to ask him whether he would lend me £170 on the contract I had just signed with the Harmonophone Company. After hearing the test record I had made for them, their manager, Mr. Dennison, had offered me a contract for two years in which I bound myself to play as many records as they pleased, of any type they chose, from solos and concertos to accompaniments (in fact, I was to be their musical hack) for an inclusive salary of £170 per annum for two years, to be increased to £200 should they require my services for another year. I was to undertake not to play for any other gramophone company during the period in which I was under contract to them, but in return they undertook to arrange two recitals per annum for me in some European capital or other.

I signed, or to be more accurate, my mother signed, this contract, a week before the order of the sheriff's court was to be put into execution.

My mother, poor woman, having suffered severely

through taking responsibilities for others, heartily disliked having to put her name to any document concerning itself with me, but I soon browbeat her into acting for me over this affair, and in the end she signed for and on my behalf without even properly reading through the contract.

I dared not ask the Harmonophone people for an advance of my entire year's salary, which, according to my contract, was payable weekly. The business manager, a common-voiced, burly, somewhat familiar individual, frightened me. And so I plucked up my courage and tackled Francis Kennedy. If I could possibly procure this advance on my salary, the situation at home would be saved.

There was something in Francis Kennedy that made one talk.

FRANCIS: So you want an advance, eh? Of how much?

MYSELF: £170, if you please, Mr. Kennedy. You were so kind to me, giving me the introduction to the company, I thought I could dare to ask you to use your influence with them. . . .

FRANCIS: See here, little woman, just you tell me right out what you want this money for, and I'll see what I can do.

MYSELF: It's for debts, Mr. Kennedy.

FRANCIS: Debts! Whose?

MYSELF: Mine, Mr. Kennedy.

FRANCIS: Say, just how old are you?

MYSELF: I'm sixteen and a half, Mr. Kennedy.

FRANCIS: Sixteen and a half and in debt! Some kid! Gee, how's that?

MYSELF: It's hard to explain. It's somebody else's debt I've taken over and got to pay—or that person will lose everything in the world. It's hard to explain.

FRANCIS: Say, your mother signed your contract, didn't she?

MYSELF: Yes, Mr. Kennedy, because it wouldn't be legal if she didn't. But I'm quite a responsible person, really, you know. It would have meant just as much if I'd signed it myself. I know what I'm about, and I know quite a lot about life, Mr. Kennedy. Life, Mr. Kennedy, not—not—— (Here I stammered a little. I know now that I meant what we speak about frankly these days as "sex," but then I hardly even dared mention this word to myself.)

FRANCIS: Does your mother know you want this advance?

MYSELF: Oh, no!

FRANCIS: What, for instance, do you know about "life"?

(Here, I am sure, his eyes twinkled, and the muscles on each side of his mouth twitched. His voice was soft, and he drawled in a peculiarly pleasant way. His teeth were marvellous, and his shoulders far too square, and his hair was flat and fair.)

MYSELF: Life—let me see. In life there are bailiffs and writs. Life is just money, money, money—the absence of it. Music is sacrificed to it, especially here in England. Life is the Baroness T—— and her peculiar perfume, and my own mother and flower women in funny hats, and caviare and boiled potatoes, and not being able to get a trill right on b flat and b and suceeding in frying eggs *really* well so that they aren't leathery.

"Gee," said Francis Kennedy, laughing, "I don't think I know a thing about life. What else is life?"

"Oh, life is also the etiquette that makes me say to myself: 'I don't think I can dare tackle Mr. Kennedy,' " I replied, my courage increasing enormously as I felt his irrepressible sympathy, "and then changing to 'Perhaps Mr. Kennedy-is-an-understanding-person-after-all.' "

"He is," replied my hero, "only he wants to know all about it. Consider my position. A kid of sixteen comes without her parent's knowledge to ask me for an advance of £170—not an ordinary kid, but a little genius, let us say. A bright, cute, cunning kid, who talks like dialogue in a play or novel. She knows about 'life.' "

"I do, I do!" I protested.

"Quite bluntly—what do you want it for? The money, I mean?"

"Mr. Kennedy, Mother and I've got the bailiffs in the house, and I want to get them out." And then,

for some unaccountable reason, or perhaps because of the strain of the past few weeks, or my humiliation after my confession, I burst into tears. Francis Kennedy sprang from the red-leather armchair and knelt beside my chair.

"Say, don't cry, honey, don't cry. You're the pluckiest kid I've ever met, honey, you're just marvellous. Of course, you'll have your £170, only we'll make it a loan, not an advance, and you can repay me when you're rich, see? And we'll make it £200, because it's a rounder sum." And so on, comfortingly for about half an hour. I sobbed out the whole of my story to him and eventually blew my nose in his handkerchief. I did not realize then, as I do now, that I went to him in my trouble because he was an American. For I have noticed that there is a paternal quality in American men, in even the youngest of them, that breaks down the barriers which usually surround women. Through Francis Kennedy I have received the impression that Americans are much closer to the realities of daily life than their European cousins. They are younger in outlook; the battle for livelihood is still near them; the conquest of nature not yet so far behind that they cannot sympathize with those unfortunates who battle ignobly for their merest necessities. They gamble, they risk, they do not hoard life. They are not cautious, for they do not yet appear to have learned to believe that fortunes or happiness depend

upon material or psychical thrift. Emotionally they are not stingy; and in the same way, in business, they play with schemes involving millions of dollars.

Francis Kennedy's attitude was not one of overwhelming surprise that I should approach him. Why not? he felt, we're all human. "Give 'em a chance" is perhaps the most typical of all the American slogans. It is the motto that has made America the astounding country it is to-day. It is easy enough to lose lightheartedly anything that is easily retrievable.

Shortly after this encounter with my benefactor, my mother and I were able to pay our worst debts, and the sheriff's officer departed (with many protestations of friendship). Francis Kennedy called on my mother and had tea with us, and after that I was allowed to go out to tea with him.

And so our little "affair" developed.

I had never met anyone so kind or considerate before; nor had I ever been so closely acquainted with anyone quite so good-looking. My father had been, until recently, the only male element in my life. My infatuation was utterly absurd, and yet I am glad that I, for one, did not escape just this kind of absurdity. It has become one of the tenderest memories of my youth.

There are certain details which I shall never forget. Francis, for instance, always ordered the most expensive food when we were together (it was he

who introduced me to caviare, of which I had heard but never tasted), and he who made me drink *Château Yquem*. And above all, he made me feel I was a kind of future Paderewski, that there was a certain place in the musical world yet to be filled, and that I was the creature destined to fill it.

Until then I had dwelt with music. It was my daily food and drink. I didn't think about it, but I was a musical gourmet; I loved the best and most delicate of musical food, but I think I was not above "bread and jam," namely waltzes and jolly dance melodies. What I have always detested is the second-rate, pretty cake with pink and green icing and its equivalent in music.

One does not enthuse about one's daily bread, and so I did not spend my life talking about music. I took it too much for granted. At this period I saw Francis Kennedy three, and sometimes four, times a week. He loved poetry (Longfellow) and would recite to me in restaurants long passages from "Hiawatha," leaning his elbows on the table, his chin in his hands. I, who knew nothing of poetry, gazed at him in awe. For several months we adored one another mutually, in complete silence, from our two different planets. A little later I was to learn that he understood absolutely none of my ambitions, and at the same time his interpretation of the term "success" utterly escaped me. After we had been acquainted for about six months I began to know my

friend better, and with my knowledge I found my feeling of friendship (I will say my *love*) increasing even as my infatuation waned. I became unhappy about him and would cry to myself, for I hated to substitute the lovable man I knew for the demigod I had hitherto worshipped. And then something, some tiny little thing, I don't remember what, occurred, that made me uncomfortable for him. I think he let me feel too acutely that he was very rich—and that he knew it. Like a great many wealthy Americans, he felt that his nationality and money gave him the right to say anything. "Say, honey, I don't like that hat," he would exclaim, "get yourself another." And then, seeing the expression on my face, he would add: "Send me the bill." He never talked simply about "my hat," but always about "my fifteen-dollar hat." It was always "my sixty-guinea watch" or "my hundred-dollar coat." We went out to tea, and the orchestra played selections from *Pagliacci*. He hummed with glee and said: "That's a lovely thing, lovely, don't you think so?" When I played him Bach's Prelude and Fugue in C minor, he leant back in my mother's armchair and laughed. "Some acrobatics!" he exclaimed. "You're a little marvel! Now play us something nice."

"Something nice?"

"You know what I mean. Something understandable."

When he heard that I could have had a career as

an infant prodigy and had deliberately not taken it up he was quite cross with me. "Why didn't you make hay while the sun shone?" he asked me. "I hope the sun hasn't set yet," I answered, "and I couldn't have done any really good work, only 'good for a child' kind of stuff." "Well, you could have made money and then retired and done what you liked."—"And got into lots of bad habits," I added, "and been one of those awful child performers, playing a lot of 'effective' things!"—"Bad habits?"—"Bad *musical* habits. Doing things the easy way instead of the *right* way." But Francis did not want to see my point at all. Did I not want to be the female Paderewski (Paderooski, he called him) and get on? Paderooski gave the public what it wanted—— "No, no, no!" I cried, I should never want to pander to "public" tastes on the concert platform. I would far rather teach small girls or play in a cinema. He used *clichés,* such as "knowing which side your bread is buttered," and "he who pays the piper calls the tune." Then he went back to America for five months. Parting from him caused me the acutest agony. For several days before his departure I lay awake at night and wept. I thought the reason had gone out of my life. Two days after he left I was still intolerably sad. So many things made me think of him, I longed terribly for his presence. And then, naturally, and thankfully, my longing became dulled,

and the date of his return grew into something to look forward to, instead of the date of his departure being a painful memory. When he returned I was overwhelmed with joy to see him, but with a shock I realized that, although I had missed him terribly, my world had not remained entirely desolate throughout his absence. And somehow I believe a strange thing had happened while he was away. I had grown up. When he had left me I had been a child, and then, perhaps owing to the fact that I was not daily referred to either as "kid," or "honey" or "little girl," I had begun to assert myself. I had put up my hair, too——

I had met James through Bella Sanding at a concert. James was twenty and penniless and enthusiastic in a quiet, burning, shamefaced way. I played at Bella's house one afternoon when only he and one other friend were present, and he stood at the end of the piano, blushing crimson, clenching his fists nervously until the knuckles were white, while he murmured his thanks. His gratitude was touching; I had seldom met with such passionate appreciation.

Francis returned to London in time for my second recital under the Harmonophone contract. The last item on the programme that night was a spectacular affair by a modern English composer, full of difficult chromatic scales and trills and fireworks, none of them in the best of taste; but the piece was effec-

tive, and I was already tainted with the desire to show off before the uninitiated. Francis and James met later in the artists' room. Francis was immensely impressed by my rendering of the difficult piece of fireworks which he thought was like Bach. James was moved almost to speechlessness by the concert. He squeezed my fingers and, at last, murmured: "How beautifully you play Bach—the C minor Prelude and Fugue. But that last thing! Did you have to do it?"

"Well," I replied, "I know it's wrong of me, but it goes down well, you know!"

"How well I understand! If you *knew* the stuff I *have* to write at times!"

Ah! I felt, to be with someone who spoke one's own language, what a relief! I was quite elated. I noticed Francis gazing at us in a perturbed way.

On the following evening I dined alone with Francis at a quiet restaurant which was a particular haunt of his. He had especially asked my mother's permission to take me out. I remember distinctly a small orchestra consisting of three demure ladies, playing the piano, the violin, and the violoncello. I remember thinking that no woman should ever play the 'cello; it made her so ugly. They played the Intermezzo from "L'Arlésienne"—that I shall never forget; nor the way in which Francis gazed at me across the table, his elbows on the tablecloth. His mouth wore a grim smile, and suddenly his eyes filled

with tears. "Baby," he said, "I've come back from the States, and I've been here three days and I find everything—over."

"What do you mean?" I cried in dismay.

"I don't know whether that young guy means anything to you or not, but he's certainly made *me* see something. I see clear now; you and I belong to a different generation, a different world."

"Oh, Francis, what are you saying?" I felt horribly guilty. I did so wish he would not voice my own opinion, one that I had never admitted to myself, in this blunt fashion.

"See here, little woman, it's no use. I'll tell you right now something you know: I've been crazy about you for over a year. And you notice I've never said a single word, not a word."

"L'Arlésienne" droned on. Its desperate sadness and my companion's look of misery clutched at my very heartstrings. No melody, I think, is quite so hopelessly sad as that Intermezzo from "L'Arlésienne." I suddenly felt lonely and lost. "No, no!" I managed to say, "don't say anything."

"I've got to say it. I've been crazy about you, and I guess you've been pretty fond of me; but there's somewhere we don't meet at all. I've had my success—you're making yours. You don't want a fellow who's had all the adventure, you want someone who'll stand beside you as an equal, a beginner, and go through it all with you from the start.

You don't want a guy who knows too much, you want a fellow discoverer."

I made no comment.

"And then there's that art of yours. I don't understand what you're driving at. You don't seem to want anything I could give you. You want to fight your own windmills. Why, you and I wouldn't have the same friends."

"Oh, Francis!"

He sighed and looked down at the tablecloth. Presently he cleared his throat and said: "And there's something I ought to have told you long ago, only I thought maybe I could arrange things." He paused. "You see, Baby, I'm married. I've been married for six years."

"Oh!" I gasped.

"I went back to the States and saw my wife, and I meant to talk to her about a divorce. I'll be quite frank about her, Baby. I tell you she's straight and on the level. She's a handsome woman and two years older than I. She'd stick to me through most things, but she's spoilt, had every darned thing she's wanted all her life, so she thinks she's neurasthenic, and my presence for any length of time irritates her. She's a good woman, but you spoilt me for her. And yet, somewhere, down at the rock bottom, I felt she and I had the same standards, understood one another. So, somehow, I couldn't bring myself to tell

her I wanted a divorce. And now, since I've come back——"

I said nothing, for I was crying bitterly.

"—Since I've come back I'm glad I didn't mention divorce to her after all. Don't cry. It's better so. It's best to cut it right out now before we've gotten used to one another again, instead of making ourselves still more darn unhappy by waiting till we find it unbearable to part. It's bad enough as it is." "L'Arlésienne" was over, and the world was a blank. To this day that Intermezzo evokes in me the most poignant of memories. Francis led me out of the restaurant gently and then saw me home in a cab. As we neared our destination, he turned to me impulsively and said: "Kiss me good-bye, little woman." He took me in his arms and kissed me, and then suddenly, I realized that he was crying, too, quite silently, as I felt a tear on my cheek. I wound my arms around his neck and kissed him ardently, suddenly feeling that it was I who had deliberately thrown away something very precious. I began to sob unrestrainedly. "Francis, I love you so much. Don't go!"

"It's no good, Baby, you and I are strangers. We'd never stay happy together. We've got to part before it gets too hard."

And so we parted, knowing it was a wrench for both of us. I heard two days later, through the Baroness T——, that he was sailing in a few weeks'

time. Four months later I received the following cablegram from him:

WIFE STORY ALL BLUFF STOP HAD TO SAY SOMETHING TO STARTLE YOU STOP PARTING ALL FOR THE BEST STOP BE HAPPY ALWAYS STOP LOVE FRANCIS

My wretchedness was complete. It almost made me ill. I knew I should never see him again.

Then one day Bella and I met young James in Bond Street. He told us shyly that he was about to buy my gramophone record of the Bach C minor Prelude and Fugue and asked us to go into the shop with him to hear it. We heard it through (horrible it was, too, like all piano records in those days), but James became its proud owner.

"Harmonophone," read James from the label, and the word flailed me like a whip.

We still possess that record. It is all scratched and worn now, and impossible to play, but it is still unbroken. Oliver and I came across it the other day while sorting out our old records. . . .

But that brings me to the gramophone records. . . .

CHAPTER III

YES, Oliver and I sorted out all our old gramophone records the other day.

"Gosh," cried my son, picking up a worn disk, "this must be old, almost as old as your Bach record —but no! Nineteen-fourteen, the year of the war."

"What is it?"

"'Your King and Country Need You,'" Oliver read out.

"Good heavens!" Then yielding to a sudden impulse: "Put it on," I said, "I want to hear it."

I began to writhe at the second line of the 1914 recruiting song. It was sung by a female with a sentimental tremolo voice;

"We don't want to lose you
But we think you ought to go . . ."

"Take it off," I cried out, "I can't bear it! I sang it myself with gusto, and it was that song that drove your father to the war. One used to hear it in cinemas and music halls, one sang it in choruses—and it drove men out to their death or worse. Or worse, I maintain!" I repeated.

Oliver took my hand and held it as if to comfort

me. "Cheer up, Mum," he said, "in some ways it meant Dad's career."

"His career!" I cried. "You mean the success of *Corpse Mountain?*"

"He'd never have written it but for his own experience, Mum, and it's a great book. You know it. And it made us rich."

"Blood money."

"Don't be bitter, Mum. It's a great book. And it started him writing books, too, poor Dad."

James went to the war early in 1915. I sat on his coat tails as long as I could, but in the end, and in spite of his wife and three children, he went off to France to fight for his King and Country. How odd it is to think that James, so level-headed and unemotional, should have been caught up in that artificial maelstrom of glorious antagonism for a race that he previously held in a certain esteem! Afterwards he tried to pretend that he desired the Great Experience of risking his life, that the man in the street drove him to soldiering by constant, silent, unanswerable accusations, that he was tired of being accosted by meddlesome females, who desired to know why he was not in the trenches; I maintain that he went foolishly, in all sincerity, as millions of others went, for some sort of ideal, and because of those millions of others whom he could not forsake. I believe he had faith, that unquestioning quality in which all martyrs are bred and in which

they die, creating more havoc by their blind loyalties than if they had been born less noble by nature and consequently less impassioned and more coldly rational. We were all hysterical during the war; we had to be, if only to make the war period endurable. In addition to this, it was deduced that he who was not insane was a pacifist, and he who was a pacifist was a traitor. We were cowed by the mob into being crazy beasts, and we, in turn, singly contributed to the mob spirit by adding to it our individual souls. A colossal and terrible Circe hung over us women and ruled us all with a rod of iron. Reason was outlawed from among us. We exulted in our craven mass stupidity, rushed about and gibbered idiotically, self-righteously, and felt very pleased with ourselves. I confess I did. I grovelled and wallowed and snorted with the rest of Circe's swine. I was terrified for James and I hated to part from him, but once he had taken the step and left us, I was proud of him, God forgive me, and strutted with the other women; my man was fighting. I am ashamed of myself now; not ashamed of James's fighting or of the way in which I made the best of things: I am ashamed of my conduct. Why did I so utterly lose my dignity and yelp idiotic heroics? Why did I not admit, quietly and decorously, that I was, as James's wife, in fact, making the best of a bad job, that we were all making the best of bad jobs, that I thought it deplorable of civil-

ized people like the Germans to take to the sword and march into Belgium, that although, of course, we too, a civilized nation like the English, were forced to resort to warfare (I knew very little about it), it was all a ghastly pity? Whenever an aëroplane or zeppelin descended in flames, why, instead of watching it coolly, did I not turn away in horror? Why was I almost boisterous? What meant all the cheering and waving of flags? And if cheering was necessary to keep up our spirits generally, why were we not honest? We called it the "Great War," and we were sacrificing our men for our allies; but if it was a great war for those at the front, it was a miserable, petty business of meat rations and bread coupons and profiteering for those left behind, and one listened to mean tales of French peasants who exploited our men and tittle-tattled to each other contemptibly of the way in which certain Belgian refugees in England took advantage of their benefactors. I blush to remember it all, I wish I had behaved myself. *"Mea culpa, mea culpa,"* I say to myself as I recollect my own absurdities.

Helen and Kitting were small girls, Oliver scarcely out of babyhood, when they saw their father off at Victoria. I took Helen and Kitting to the station, and I shall never forget Helen's behaviour as the train moved out, containing its load of men. Suddenly, as though she knew exactly what was happening (James and I had purposely made little of his

going, in front of the children), her eyes widened and she began to run beside the train through the crowd. "Daddie!" she sobbed, "Daddie! Don't go away, please don't go! I'm frightened, Daddie!" When I recovered she was in hysterics. I comforted her as well as I could, but I believe it was actually little Kitting who led us both back along the platform. I found I could not see her very well, that I did not know or care very much whither I went. I felt dazed, with a horrid sensation at the pit of my stomach and a twisting feeling in my chest, and a conviction that, above all, I *must* not think.

That night Helen crept into my bed and wept a little, very quietly, before going to sleep. We slept together, hugging each other very closely, and in the morning we both felt better. At breakfast my stolid and deep-voiced younger daughter scolded us both. She had been lonely in her bed, had deeply resented Helen's desertion, had even felt frightened, at one time, of a pale dressing-gown hanging behind the door. I was sorry for the child, my poor baby, who must have suffered, I thought, from a feeling of being left "in the cold." How heartbreakingly unhappy she must have been, I reflected soulfully. Is there anything, even in the later years, to be compared with the peculiar miserable loneliness of neglect? I was full of contrition, and crying: "Oh, darling!" picked her up in my arms in the endeavour to make amends. I could have spared myself my

sentimental alarms: there was no cause for them. The child suffered from no inferiority complex; it did not enter into her head that she had been in any degree slighted. Sturdy little soul, I meditated at the time, devoid of self-pity or hyper-sensitiveness, how confident you are; really very like your father. He does not require constant proof of love, neither do you; affectionate in manner but utterly untormented by any craving for love or attention, accepting with grace but seldom asking, for all the wealth of devotion lavished upon you by your family and friends.

I did not keep that impression of James very much longer.

In the autumn of 1916 James returned from the Western Front, gassed in the stomach. The pain he suffered was excruciating, but he was a patient martyr and bore this ghastly, unnecessary calamity without complaint. I watched him agonizing, and at the same time astounded and incredulous. I watched him formulate literature out of his torments. His detachment had, for me, something almost gruesome. He never recovered, his health was forever shattered, but he accepted his trouble with calm philosophy. In the intervals of pain and sickness he wrote his greatest book, *Corpse Mountain,* not published until ten years later, when it was the first in that swarm of war books that have suddenly come into fashion. By the following year he was

well enough to go out, and in the latter part of 1918 he resumed work in spite of terrible physical weakness owing to a shrunken stomach.

The war, the war, the war. It wounded not only James's body but his life, my life, our life together. He had been let into the secret of suffering, his knowledge lay between us like a sword; it isolated him, branded him. There was That which he knew and I should never know. It was as if he had achieved a Sangrael of horror that I should never achieve; great vistas of feeling, of emotional experience which I should never contemplate and therefore never understand. There was a language in which he could express himself, that had become his favourite language, the language of his soul, which, he felt, it was impossible to teach me; and of the language in which we two had hitherto conversed he had altogether lost the savour. Did such a thing happen to other couples or only to James and me, I wonder? Was it only because my husband was exceptionally sensitive that this tragedy befell us, that his individual experience reached out its gory hand and destroyed our mental communion with one another? Had our trouble been less subtle we might have come to grips with it; as it was, we were totally unable to define it. It was not that James had become pain-proud, a snob of suffering (as many men and women are who have had more than their share of it), it was merely that he and I had come

to different standards of physical and emotional values. It interests me to know whether I stood alone in this. Shared combat is obviously a bond; it is, in my experience, so strong a bond that often harshness, unkindness, unfaithfulness on either side have not the power to break it. Husbands and wives who have shared ambitions and struggles are one another's prisoners; the husband may bully, and the wife may nag, and each get on the other's nerves to the point of exasperation; they may cause their friends to wonder why the ménage still continues to exist: it continues because the husband and wife have too much in common, have become a fixed habit with one another; they should have parted earlier. The finer the chains become, the stronger they are. When all reasons for a life together seem to have faded, the instinct for partnership remains, strongest when it can stand alone, untrammelled by such unnecessary appendages as reason or duties. If things go by contraries then perhaps personal, unshared suffering is an enemy to close comradeship, especially when, as in the case of James, personal knowledge is a burden of terrible memories, which it would be a relief to share. Desperately, childishly, I wished I had undergone even physical suffering of a degree that could compare with his, but even the bearing of my children had not caused me the intolerable agonies it causes some women, and the months of uncertainty and

anxiety at home while he was away at the front could not have been by any means as intense as the fears and repulsions of his own highly sensitive and fastidious nature while he served in France.

There came a time when James began to feel ashamed of his constant ailing. He preferred not to talk about his ills, he resumed outwardly his charming manner, his elegancies of speech, his pretty, only semi-serious air of cynicism. He called me "dear" ("Yes, dear. No, dear") in a coolly affectionate tone of voice that made the tears sear my eyes, and made me want to rush up to my room, lock my door, bitter with loneliness and nostalgia. James was civil, distantly courteous to me, to me, his wife! There had been a time when, always reticent and reserved, he had blushed crimson with shyness and stammered endearing words to me. I could still feel his trembling fingers, awkwardly pushing the hair back from my brow, a caress characteristic of the husband lost to me. He no longer volunteered the slightest demonstration of affection, though always too polite to rebuff me in any way. I remember one Saturday we motored to the seaside, to Folkestone it was, for the week-end. Helen was with us, and on the Sunday afternoon we stood on the Leas and watched the boats down in the harbour. Helen held James by one hand, and she sucked the thumb of her other hand, her eyes round and melancholy. James fingered the bridge of his horn-rimmed spec-

tacles thoughtfully. *"Hic jacet Jacobus,"* he said quietly, waving in the direction of the harbour, "or rather, a little farther up the coast."

"What does that mean, Daddie?" asked Helen.

"Hic jacet is Latin for 'here lieth,' my daughter. Some day, perhaps, if you show any particular literary ability, you shall be taught Latin. An excellent study, my child, and of great value to anyone who wishes to indulge in refined prose. I said 'indulge,' mark you. Were you a journalist like your unfortunate Papa, you would appreciate that good prose is indeed a self-indulgence."

"James, you are completely mystifying her," I said, laughing, "poor Helen."

"And what is *Jacobus?"* asked Helen.

"Jacobus is James," replied her father; "Here lieth James!"

I gave him a quick look and saw that he was smiling. Smiling to himself, I thought, noticing the mildly ironical twist of his lips and the dreamy expression of his eyes. He went on, ostensibly to Helen: "I left him here when I went to France, and later, I understand he died, and I never saw him again."

"Who, Daddie?"

"My friend, James—er *Jacobus,"* he added hastily, noticing the bewilderment in the child's face.

"Oh, James!" I exclaimed.

"What, dear?" he asked with infinite politeness.

"Tell me about him," I urged.

"There is nothing to tell. He died, and I carried on for him—very inadequately, I am afraid. His wife and children must be charitable and forgive me. He was rather a jolly young man, and I am such a crock."

"Oh, James," I murmured. And impulsively I cried: "Oh, don't be so lonely, and do let me in! I can't bear it."

"I beg your pardon, my dear? I don't quite understand?" He was the picture of courteous puzzlement. "Very dense of me, I'm sure, but——"

"Run along and play, Helen. James, why do you shut me out of your confidence? Am I not fit to share your troubles? You are terribly changed, quite a stranger. I'm lonely, too, James——"

"My dear, I'm sorry if I am inconsiderate. I will try not to be in future. What would you like to know? There, there, I'm sure you're the sweetest wife in the world, darling. You mustn't worry about anyone as dull as me."

That was as near as I ever got to the confidence of my husband since his return from the war.

The two elder children understood only too well that their father was a guest, a stranger, beneath his own roof. His deference for us all, for "the pack of us," was out of place. He conversed with his daughters, reasonably, like a caller. They realized that he was not like other daddies, and also that his

health was delicate. Kitting, at the age of seven, sighed heavily: "Poor Daddie-boy." She would sit, glumly, her lower lip thrust out, her eyebrows knit, a trifle resembling Beethoven, and, with an expression of fierce concentration, question me about her father. I tried to explain to her that "Daddie's tummy is upset. Very, very badly hurt."—"When I'm growed up I'll be a doctor, and I'll invent new tummies, sort of machine tummies made of steel, like engines. That's what I'll do when I'm growed up, and I'll take out my insides and put in machine ones instead. Insides always go wrong."

That was the effect he had on Kitting.

Oliver held up a dance record. It was called "Everything Is Peaches down in Georgia." "To be kept or junk, Mum?" he questioned.

"On the junk pile," said Kitting, who had just entered the room.

"No," I said, "please not."

"Dammit all, Mum, we can't keep *everything.* You want to keep *everything,*" complained Kitting. "Be firm with her, Oliver."

"Store it," I commanded, "that tune means a lot. It was one of the post war fox trots."

"Yes, Mum?" from Kitting.

"Sit down, Kitting, and I'll tell you a story that will interest you."

"No, not now," interrupted Oliver, "for God's sake, let's go on with the job."

"Listen, children, I heard that tune for the first time one day in June, 1919, the day that Peace was declared. It was the day I met Christopher for the first time—at a garden party in aid of disabled soldiers. I danced it with him, I was a young woman still, and he was a young officer just returned from the war, and we talked and talked, and then he went over to your father who was sitting in a corner with a silly old lady who bored him, and they began to talk too—and after that he came to see us, and so he became the friend of the family he is to-day."

Kitting's blue eyes suddenly narrowed, and she looked at me strangely. "Let's keep the record," she said. "It's funny," she added, all at once, "how I didn't like Christopher a bit when I was a kid. I used to imagine he looked at me in a queer almost disapproving way, and (isn't it odd?) he used to fill me with rage. I remember I would go upstairs to my room and wander up and down, and sometimes I cried with hatred. Gosh, how we all resented him, Helen and Oliver and I—didn't we, Oliver?"

"Yes," assented Oliver, "only you were the worst."

"I remember," I said. "I was perfectly aware of it. And he was so good for you, too. You took me so much for granted, all of you, that when a stranger came in and showed some appreciation of me, you

were furiously jealous. He ragged you mercilessly, girls, with a perfectly unsmiling face. He made fun of you and showed you up for the possessive, self-centred little flappers you were turning into, and you were livid at being made fun of. You were beginning to take yourselves seriously, poor darlings, and he just wouldn't behave as though anything you said or thought mattered."

"I *hated* him," replied Kitting slowly, in a low voice.

"Yes," I said. And a silence fell upon us. I could not go on talking, telling about Christopher and me. I knew too much, had guessed too certainly our Christopher's secret, first *my* Christopher's, then Kitting's Christopher's. For he had been mine once, yes, indeed, strange as it may seem, when I was a young woman still, at my best, in my early thirties. That was what I could not discuss with my daughter —or anyone.

Christopher had always had a very merry, light-hearted personality, and, on the surface, had been a bit of a mocker, rather what one would term a "naughty boy." He was a big, loose-limbed giant, had been three times slightly wounded and had had his appendix out during the years 1914–1918. He had fought on the Italian front. At the end of the war he was twenty-five years of age.

The day he came to tea for the first time he behaved like an old friend of the family—rather

cheekily, I must admit, but with a certain self-assured charm. I was alone in the drawing room with Kitting when he was announced.

"How do you do?" he said, as he came forward and shook hands. "Please forgive the informality of my call, but you are such nice people, I felt I had to see you again." He subsided into an armchair. "May I smoke? Thank you. Well, well, well, I'm glad you're at home. But where," he asked "is 'Usband?"

"My husband," I replied, laughing, "is upstairs, working, writing a new book——"

"Working? God Almighty, what's he doing that for? He's been to the war, hasn't he?"

"Do you never intend to work again?"

"Lord, no! I'm an 'ero. 'Eroes won't ever have to work never no more, I've been told. Well, well, well. Tell me, what's for tea?"

"Gentleman's Relish," said Kitting very suddenly.

"Little girl," replied Christopher severely, "have you never heard that your kind should be seen and not heard? In future, do not speak until you are spoken to."

"You shouldn't ask what's for tea," replied Kitting, grinning up into his face, "it's not polite when you're in other people's houses. You should take what's given to you."

"My dear child, you don't understand. It's dif-

ferent for me, I can *never* be rude. To begin with, I'm grown-up. There, what do you say to that? And then I'm a war hero. I've been to the war. Have *you* been to the war?"

Kitting looked at him, nonplussed, but grinning.

"Let this be a lesson to you not to answer back," he continued with immense pomposity; "and now" —he waved his hand—"run along and play."

"She's going to have her tea first," I said. But Kitting, blushing to the eyes, was already at the door.

"I'll tell Daddie there's a visitor," she said, "and that tea is ready, and then I'll do my homework." And she was gone. Christopher was smiling impishly, but, "You were unkind to my little girl," I said, "she doesn't understand."

"Rats," he answered, "she'll have to develop a sense of humour sometime. It's good for her to have her leg pulled. And now, for more important things——"

"But," I protested, "she's the most important thing in the world to me."

"Oh, dear, oh, dear! The perfect mother! Really, my dear lady, it's all wrong. Of course she's important, and so are all the other babies in this world, but surely you women have a duty to yourselves, a life of your own to live out? It's your turn now. She'll have hers. You can't just go on living by proxy for the rest of your years!"

Living by proxy, I thought, living by proxy?

Living by proxy as a description of my existence remained with me for a very long time. Indeed, living by proxy——

Restlessly he rose from the armchair, crossed to the mantelpiece, fingered a lacquer box, then, after a pause, flung himself down onto the piano stool, opened the piano, and began to strum. I stood by the instrument and watched him, silently. "Damn," he said, as he picked out a melody awkwardly, "wish I could play. Who plays here? Anyone? Or is this divine piano just kept for the offspring to tinkle on? Does 'Usband play? Do you?"

"Why should *I?*"

"Yes, why should you? You've got the children to cope with, and the household, and 'Usband. Women never seem to get time for music, and when they do get time——" He shrugged his shoulders significantly.

"Yes? When they do get time?" I urged.

"Well, then they just don't go in for abstract sciences."

"I see. You know a lot for your age, don't you, Mr. H——?"

He chuckled. "An awful lot. Wish I could play, though."

"You are fond of music?"

"Passionately—listening to it, that is."

Just then James entered the room. Greetings were

exchanged, and James, finding our guest at the piano, said, by way of conversation: "You are fond of music?"

"Yes, but I can't play, alas and alack!" replied Christopher. James removed his thick, horn-rimmed spectacles and proceeded to wipe them with his silk handkerchief. "Then you must ask Elsa to play for you," he said.

"Good God!" cried Christopher, turning to me. "You might have told me! So you're the one who plays?"

"The wife is a pianist," James informed him, smiling his own typical, secret smile.

"Was," I corrected. James raised his eyebrows. I went on: "Have you any other abstract interests besides music, Mr. H——?"

"Had," he mimicked me.

"And what were they?" pursued James.

"Stinks," replied Christopher briefly, "but that's all over. If there hadn't been a war I'd have gone in for research."

"And you can't go on where you left off?" I questioned.

"No," he bantered, "I'm an 'ero; ain't going to work never no more."

Tea was served, but Christopher refused it. "Never drink tea," he said, "thanks very much."

"A whisky and soda?" offered my husband. An impish grin spread over Christopher's face again.

He looked at me out of the corners of his eyes with the same expression that Oliver used to assume when he was asking for a third helping of chocolate pudding. "That *would* be nice," he said.

"I disapprove," I stated solemnly.

"Oh," he pleaded, "do be kind. Just think, I've been so good and brave, I've been to the war. And it was such a nasty war. Mayn't I have whisky, when I went to the war so nicely?"

James said: "Do play us something, Elsa," and poured Christopher's drink. Christopher took it, and I went over to the piano. As I started to play he put down his tumbler and, leaning back, closed his eyes and listened. When I finished, he did not move; he only opened his eyes and whispered: "Please go on." After that James quietly excused himself, saying it was imperative that he should send in an article by the following morning, and left the room. I went on playing. Every time I stopped he only murmured: "Oh, please go on!"

"Oh, but I can't go on any more," I protested, once.

"Oh, but you must!" he insisted, quite serious now, "you don't understand—you can't—you live with music—but I've been starving and thirsting, I'm parched. Do you know, can you imagine, what it means really to starve, to feel thirsty for music——?"

"I can imagine it," I answered quietly.

"Then, for Christ's sake, go on playing!" he cried, in a voice that frightened me a little, for there was a note of hysteria in it, and I had not met just Christopher's type of war-strained hero before. James, returned from the front, had frightened me as the loneliness and the stillness of the night frighten one; but this youth struck awe into me as the wind strikes awe. He was turbulent as a storm, and he troubled me a little. I went on playing, and oddly, I felt my heart beating as I played. James was a sensitive plant: he had shrunk from the blast and had instinctively embedded himself in a rockery of reserve and solitude; but this other man was a storm-tossed tree, violently shaken by all he had undergone, primitive, dangerous, as only powerful things can be dangerous.

"I don't play well any more," I said with humility. His answer was a harsh laugh. It stung me a little, and I exclaimed: "What's the joke?"

"When one's hungry, bread does as well as cake —so long as it's good bread. And this is good bread. Damn good. I want some more." He suddenly bared his teeth in a savage grin, then laughed again and brought his fist down on the arm of the chair. "Want," he whispered, "want."

I turned some pages of music nervously, for somehow my heart had sunk to the level of my stomach. Then, floundering foolishly, in an effort to ward off the oppressive feeling of apprehension which had

descended upon me, I cried, with absurd rudeness: "Oh, now, please don't be melodramatic!"

He sprang to his feet and looked as if I had slapped his face. I rose from the piano stool, and we stood for a moment, stock still, looking at one another like a pair of hostile animals, eye to eye. He reddened to the ears and said, almost under his breath: "You can't say things like that." Then paused. Then said: "You said that for something to say." Then mercifully he gave a shout of laughter which broke the tension.

"I'm sorry," I said, and my voice sounded husky, "I shouldn't have said that."

"No," he replied, "it wasn't fair."

And in the silence that followed, some strange, electric thing happened to us. We looked at one another and I *knew* him. I saw him, I understood him, tormented, restless, overinformed schoolboy that he was, undisciplined, wayward, passionate creature, war-torn and rebellious. "I'll show you," he seemed to challenge Fate, "how well I have learnt your lessons these last four years. I have forgotten gentility, manners, all the trappings of cultivated society, I am not even a man, I am what you, through sending me into modern warfare, have made of me. This is how it has affected me, this war you've sent me to. It has stripped me naked. I am all instinct, all desire, male, hungry, weary, thirsty; I am blunt, I am natural, a mammal. For

I have been with Necessity, imperative Necessity, so close to death that nothing matters in the world except the sheer fact of living. And yet my soul is not dead, so that I am racked with pain and restlessness and there is no peace for me, for what is this Life that you Untormented sing about? This Life that is not just non-Death as mine is? Is it Creation? The creation of civilization, the sense of which, at a word of command, and in a crisis, falls from us like a garment of old rags?"

I shall never forget him as he stood there, at bay, a great, towering creature, with powerful shoulders, stooping slightly. He seemed to be burning with an inward flame that was consuming him slowly.

He looked at me and did not speak; and I think now, that at the time, he read in me: "There is Life that is more than non-Death. I have a husband whose soul the war has stolen, for the nearness of death has chilled him into a fear of life. He is filled with fear, and he dare not live in the open, he has hidden himself. But for you the nearness of death has banished all fear, you are immune. You are not half afraid enough of life and death. You should fear life and death as you should fear God, not too much, as James does, but not too little, as you do. You should hide a little more than you do, for hiding your nakedness is only another way of respecting God."

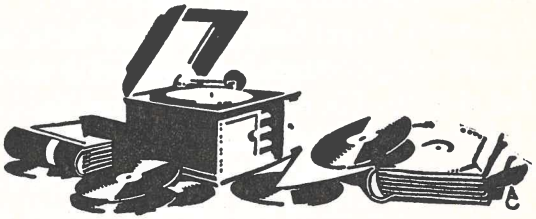
Later, as he took his leave, he asked: "May I

come again. I'm such a beggar, and you are so rich —you've so much to give—things I crave for. Let me have some crumbs, won't you?"

"Music?"

He nodded. "Good-bye," he said, "and say good-bye for me to 'Usband. And thank you."

He came very, very often after that.



CHAPTER IV

ALAS, my daughters—especially Kitting—began by hating Christopher; but not for long.

Among the junk to be sold to the rag-and-bone man are a pair of red, blue, and white striped drill cushions. They are ages old and bring back vividly the early days of our friendship, the long, hot June days, and long evenings when he used to come and sit with us in our little plot of a garden. I would sit in a cane chair, but Christopher would sit on a striped drill cushion on the grass, and James, whenever he was with us (which was not often), in a deck chair.

Christopher, soon after his return from the war, bought a somewhat ramshackle old motorcar. I gave him one of the striped cushions to put in the small of his back while driving. The car and the cushions are dissociable in my vision—as are our trips into the country. Only many years later did he sell the car, and then the cushion reverted to the house; to Kitting's den, where it reposed on a wooded, cane-bottomed chair. The cane was torn and shabby, and the cushion served to hide its defects. It was Kitting's den in which Christopher had installed her.

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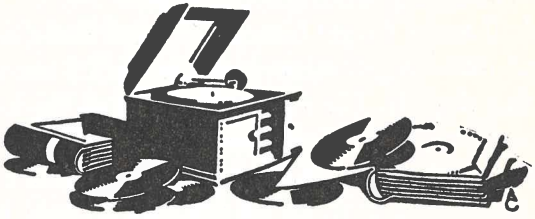

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And the only patch of colour in that drab room with its weighing contraptions, its crucibles, gas rings and filters, was the drill cushion on the seat of the shabby cane-bottomed chair. I used to lie awake in the night at that time, sorely perplexed. The face and shape of Christopher often stood out sharply against the background of my brain. I could not banish thoughts of him, oddly disturbed by the power this tormented young man had over me. I thought of many, many things—suddenly. Yes, I *thought suddenly,* thought for the first time in many years. Hitherto I had not thought overmuch. I had been a creature of instinct, perhaps even an artist (if I may be so bold as to describe myself so) by instinct, for in my early youth I had chosen the least intellectual, the most emotional of all the arts, that of music. I had not ruminated, philosophized, speculated upon abstract subjects. I had practised the piano, done the shopping, loved, married, borne children, bathed them, changed their napkins, fed them and sewn for them, occupied with the facts of living rather than theories about Life, bothered and badgered by worries of livelihood, by the need to keep the home fires burning. James alone had locked himself away, dwelling in his own soul as in an empty, crazy house. Up and down strange stairways James must be running, along tortuous passages, hither and thither, thinking, thinking—with never a single commonplace actuality to hinder the runaway

liberty of his brain. Mankind, womankind, warfare, peace, poverty, capitalism—never Elsa, Oliver, the greengrocer, toothache, or the gas bill. It made him tolerant and even tempered, distantly, logically sympathetic, for even while listening to one's tales of dull facts, he was already off translating the actual into the abstract, for the benefit of his own theories. Christopher, to him, was a type, and for the first time in my life I, too, saw a human being as a type and not as a human being. And, what was more startling, I saw myself as a type. I, who had been almost destroyed by the home fires' burning. Woman: odd, feeble creature, said I to myself, you cannot open doors yourself, from your sex life to your mother life or your art life. You are blind and deaf until you are awakened, you Sleeping Beauty, and when you are once awake you respond to every little call, every request. Is that woman's great strength or her great weakness, I asked myself, this incapacity to resist any kind of need, any kind of desire? One hears so much of "starved" women; well, of what are they starved? Surely of the opportunity of giving, of rendering service. No one holds open the doors for them, no one calls. Damn it all, I felt, can't we go and open the doors, can't we call out of our own accord? Would I, years ago, have fallen in love with James if he hadn't desired me first? No, I would not have let it be love; it would have remained attraction; but where there was

hunger, I could not resist feeding. James had desired sympathy, and as I had it, I must needs give it to him. Did I say to myself, of Christopher: "I like this youth. He interests and attracts me, I am going to attach him to me"? No, of course not. He came to me craving for understanding and tenderness, and by his bitter yearning disturbed my peace of mind. For the first time in five years someone had come to me and said: "I am music-thirsty. Play to me, for pity's sake. Craving for music can be a sheer physical agony. There are those who are eunuchs, so far as music is concerned, and they can't understand what on earth it's about." He had said: "Spread my bread with jam, please, oh, please! *You* do it, will you? No one's done that for me for years."

In a few weeks' time he was kissing me like a child every time he came to the house and every time he went. Helen and Kitting watched him, round eyed, jealous. He noticed and thanked me for every little thing I did, everything which they took for granted.

He often took the two girls and me for drives into the country in the ramshackle two-seater, the striped cushion shoved behind his back. Once out of London, we would leave the car, and the four of us wander off into the woods and fields to gather wild flowers, Kitting and I the rarer kinds because it was more fun, Christopher's hands full of buttercups because he could hold them under our chins and

say: "Do you like butter?" Helen picked marguerites because it took the least trouble. The meadows were spangled with them. We would find a place to spread the rug, with the cushion for my back, and eat our picnic tea.

One day, after one of our strolls, we had our tea on the edge of a wood, where the sun could still find us, but a stout tree could shelter us.

"The great root of this tree will make an armchair for you," he said to me. "Lean against it. I like roots, don't you? Roots of everything. Only roots, roots, roots." As I obeyed him, he remarked: "I like you in that big hat you wore yesterday better than in this little tight thing. You should always wear big hats—hats with brims." He addressed my daughters: "What do you think, girls?"

Helen and Kitting said they hadn't thought about it, at which he gave a short laugh, which made them feel uncomfortable. In fact, there was so much meaning in his odd sardonic laugh and the look accompanying it that there was no further need for words. But Helen would not be beaten. "I like Mummie best in black," she volunteered in her most grown-up manner.

"Rot! it's too old for her," he retorted sharply, "and I'm going to be very unkind now and suggest that you never thought about your mother's appearance anyway until this very moment. Nobody thinks about your mother at all, and it's time someone did.

She's too thin, and she's too pale, and she ought to wear big hats and youngish clothes. Not black, you cuckoo! That can wait until she's at least forty. But not a soul notices a darn thing about her." He picked up a sandwich. "Go on, Elsa, eat! Grow fat and merry. Go on! Eat!"

I had to laugh. It was true, no one had bothered a scrap about my clothes for at least four years. They had passed unnoticed. Occasionally, the children, of their own accord, praised a dress or a hat, but on the whole I did not dress *at* anyone, as in the early days I had dressed and done my hair *at* James. But the way in which Christopher tackled the question was so comic I felt I had to laugh. Helen and Kitting gave one another a look of confederacy, and, both sighing, rose.

"I'm going for a walk," said Helen sulkily.

"Me, too," said Kitting. Helen strolled off, Kitting limping after her. I watched them, Helen, haughty and already handsome; Kitting, a lame pony, obviously beginning a hate-talk about Christopher. How they hated him!

"They're nice," I said, following them with my eyes.

"Of course, they are darlings," he replied. I looked at him and saw he was quietly shaking with laughter. "They're the nicest kids I've met for a long time, and when I've finished with them they'll be perfect."

"Why must you bully them so?"

He lay flat on his stomach in a patch of sun, his left cheek pressed to the mossy earth. "They need it," he answered. "They invite it. So damned sure of themselves, especially Kitting. She feels everything nice that happens to her is only her just due, and I'm damned if it is. The world revolves around her, she doesn't know how to take a back seat——"

"How can you? She's such a silent little creature, always lost in her own dreams——"

"You've said a mouthful. Ever watched her when someone else is talking? If it doesn't happen to be just her kind of subject, off she goes into a kind of trance. Sits there quietly, waiting to steer everything round into her direction again. Amazing little kid, amazingly self-sufficient."

"Nothing will ever change her; she was born that way. She is that rare thing—a child that never has to be amused. You say she is an egotist. Of course she is, innately, but I maintain her egotism is of the kind that doesn't matter—it's really concentration, preoccupation. You'll never be able to make her take an interest in my hats or clothes. They just don't interest her."

"They've *got* to!"

"They never will!"

"Good Lord, you're not going to encourage her self-centredness. Doesn't she love you?"

"She adores me. Tell her I've a headache and see what happens then."

"You look and feel tired, and she hasn't bothered. Helen's much better that way. Nice kid, Helen; nice motherly little girl. She was hurt when she thought I thought she wasn't taking enough interest in you. A good sign that—to be hurt. Both of them are damned good stuff, really."

I smiled. They were "good stuff." I smiled because I was at peace for once. The patch of sun caught me now, sitting up against the trunk of the tree, among the big roots. The sun struck my body, but not my face, and it warmed me through. It was a warm sun, not hot; it was utterly comforting. In the fields in front of us crickets chirped, and around us birds twittered. Otherwise the silence was complete. Out of my peace there suddenly grew a great incomprehensible melancholy. Life seemed so strange, so remote; I felt I knew it now, for a short moment, and that in another moment it would be far away again—I should be busy, surrounded by it once more, and unable to drink it in. And all too soon I should be old, I should be ailing, done with, an unnecessary appendage to my children. Oh, God! The whole reason of my existence was my utility. I was a sheer physical necessity to a man and three children, and when I ceased to be that, my life would be over. And here the sun shone and beckoned to

me—whither did it beckon? I was not living, said the sun and the flowers, I was being lived at.

At my feet lay Christopher, his left cheek still pressed to the earth; one eye gazed at me intently. And I knew he read me like a book. Alas, he saw it all, had seen it for weeks, all my poor little life that I was not living, my days that lay wasted like a fallow field, my unused piano-playing—and so much more. "I like roots," he had said, but I could not like roots; I must not think of roots, or the whole fabric of my life would collapse in a little mound of pity, pity for myself and for James—but for myself most of all, for the waste of this fallow field. The terrifying understanding that lay between Christopher and me embarrassed us both; it was so deep that we dared not face it. It was beyond speech or touch. I did not look at him. I had no liberty at all, certainly not the liberty to die. And I think I was so touched by both peace and melancholy, I would gladly have died. No, I must not want anything, I must not contemplate roots. My duty lay in a happy endurance. I was to look at tree tops and the blue sky and the charming surface of my life and be cheered by it. My tree tops were my delightful children and the daily jolly happenings in my home, little things that made one laugh every day. I must not grouse: I had so much to be thankful for. Cowardice! Cowardice! Oh, I would not grumble. I was very well off compared with some. I was very well

off altogether, and even though the roots were there, why look for them?

"We're a couple of old war horses, aren't we?" I heard Christopher murmur. "We ought to be dead, like most of the bipeds that have suffered."

"Like James," I said, and felt a stab at my own disloyalty.

"The best of too much suffering is that it kills. Physical pain the body—and the other kind kills sensibility. The life you lead ought to have killed your sensibilities. It hasn't."

"Nearly, very nearly," I cried, but did not add: "and then, damn it, you came along." But he guessed what I thought, for he leaned upon his elbows and said: "And I'd have died, too, starved of everything that counts, if you hadn't come along with your confounded music, and—and——"

"And?"

"Elsa, you're a woman unlike the others. No flash and brilliance about you. You think a lot, but you don't talk."

"Alas! No one to talk to," I sighed. "I'd like to, sometimes."

"Talk to me."

I laughed. "I needn't, I almost need only sit and think."

"That's true," he said. Then: "Why haven't you any friends?"

I pondered that. "Oh, I'm not interesting enough,

I suppose. Also, I can't offer people their sort of a post-war good time. It'll be better when the children are older—if I can afford it. You see, James's own friends are frightfully clever—and those that are married are married to frank housekeepers. It's extraordinary how many highbrow men do that—marry sheer housekeepers, I mean. I must be disagreeable or something, because I find myself left out an awful lot. We aren't rich, you know, and when people come to our house there's nothing for them to do but talk. And since the war people can't do that any more. They've got to be amused: dance, play bridge—or drink a lot of expensive drink. Frankly, I can't afford to give the 'right' sort of party nowadays, so I'm never asked out. And then there's something else." I hesitated, for I realized I sounded a bit of a prig.

"What?"

"It sounds priggish. I don't feel priggish, though!"

"Out with it!"

"I'm not deeply interested in discussing what goes on; I mean the sort of thing that furnishes small talk."

"What, for instance?"

"Oh, games and things and smart places and clothes and hairdressing and keeping the figure and 'where is the waist-line going to be worn!' "

"Oo-er, you *are* a prig!" he exclaimed. "Don't say you're above these pleasant frivolities."

"Oh, no, no! Not above *doing* them, only above talking about them for hours. I can talk about them, of course, only I can't believe they're vital or even very important. They're not, Christopher; you know you think they're not, too."

He laughed. "What a girl you are, Elsa; sometimes more of a baby than Kitting! You get so emphatic about trifles. I don't wonder you have no friends; you're so deadly earnest—and so Victorian!"

"My God, yes," I said, staring at him. For it was true. I was old-fashioned. That was all that was the matter with me. "How unwholesome!" I said.

"Not altogether," he replied; "it has its points. You don't have to fidget and gad about."

"I don't get a chance!"

"Oh, Christ!" he suddenly exclaimed in an intolerably depressed voice, and flung himself down on his face again.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"What's it all about?" he complained. "What's the damned world heading for? Stock Exchange, games, and cheap films in picture palaces, more and more, rottener and rottener films as the public gets more and more immune. More and more make-up on women's faces, finer and finer silk stockings till every merely decently clad woman wears hose at

half a guinea a pair. Faster and smarter cars for undergrads, and so on, till England busts. Money crazy, all of us. Elsa, you're so decent you make me blink. Go and get more sham at once, smarten up, go on!"

I watched him with bated breath. He went on: "We're rotting with luxury. That's what it is, all of us! I'm as bad as the rest. One wants to forget. And why not? Why create? What's the good? Once —you won't believe it—I was going to be a scientist. Can you believe it? Give my whole life up to hard realities. I couldn't now, I've seen through realities. Roots, my dear. No good now. Got to be ignored, roots have. They don't bring in enough money. Work doesn't, you know; only sensationalism. Plodding scientific research? Bah!"

"Christopher," I pleaded, "don't be so bitter. Why don't you go on working? Work blindly. You're free, you're a man. You're independent. Your life is yours. Have a little faith. Don't always ask 'Why?' about everything. Just do it. You might as well, you'll lose nothing—probably gain, in the end. I envy you. I envy you your manhood. Do justify my envy!"

He said "Hm," thoughtfully, doubtfully.

The children, returning from their stroll, were running towards us.

"Oh, Christopher," I whispered anxiously, "you do like my children, don't you?"

He looked up at me and laughed his gentle laugh, his eyes screwed up. "My dear, I love your children," he answered softly.

"Honest?"

"Honest Injun."

Helen and Kitting came running up. "Oh, Mummie!" cried Kitting, "I saw a rabbit—a baby rabbit and a nasty big black bird. I couldn't stop it." She was breathless, and gulping.

"Oh, yes, yes!" Helen exclaimed. "We ran as fast as ever we could, but we were too late."

"Too late!" echoed Kitting and burst into tears.

I took her in my arms to comfort her. "Tell me all about it," I said, trying to soothe her. "Tell Mummie, Kitting."

"A darling little rabbit ran out of its house," she sobbed, "and as it crossed the field a big black bird swooped down and bit it——"

"Pecked at it," corrected Helen solemnly. "Nasty spiteful thing! Pecked at its poor little backbone."

"And killed it!" Kitting wept. "Poor little rabbit. And then it just flew away again and left it there. It didn't kill it for its dinner nor nothing; just nasty spitefulness! Why?"

"Mummie, it didn't kill it for food," insisted Helen, as if to make plain to me the added horror of the bird's wantonness. "It just killed it for nothing. Why?"

"For nothing!" repeated her younger sister.

"Isn't it frightful? How could it be so horrid? And we saw it pecking and the rabbit struggling, and we ran. But when we got to the rabbit it was dead. Oh, Mummie, why was the bird so horrid? Why?"

Then Christopher did an odd thing. He gave another of his peculiar, harsh laughs, his face hard and set. Kitting stopped crying for a moment and stared at him, utterly shocked. She hiccuped and ejaculated: "I hate you—you're a beast. How'd you like to be bitten to death by a huge bird?"

"Sh, sh!" I soothed.

Christopher did not answer, but like a naughty boy, he turned slowly very red about the face and neck. For an instant he and my nine-year-old daughter became contemporaries.

"Yes, how would you?" Helen took up gravely. "You're not a bit sorry. I don't care if you are grown-up, I'll say what I think!"

"You don't understand," Christopher said gently. "I know all about it. Yes, I do, Helen, all about it. I only laughed at my thoughts. I'm so awfully sorry for the little rabbit, really I am. You see, I was a hawk myself once."

Kitting, in the act of blowing her nose, stopped and gave him a look of complete mistrust and dislike. "A hawk?"

"Yes. I had silver wings, lovely ones. And I just flew about, and death resulted through my flying. I didn't do it for food, either, just for nothing at

all. Only because I was told it was the right thing to do. Perhaps the black bird has been told it must just destroy every rabbit it sees, and it is just obeying the law of its kind. It doesn't stop to think. I didn't either. I wasn't allowed to, by the way. But later I realized how foolish I'd been, thoughtlessly killing away, and then I was, oh! so sorry. You can't imagine how sorry I was—and am—I shall never get over it. Because, you see," and here he became very solemn, "for punishment I was turned into a rabbit. I'm a rabbit now. It's a secret. Nobody need ever know, because I still look like a man. You won't give me away, will you?"

Kitting shrugged her shoulders contemptuously, either at the suggestion of her giving away any secret or at the whole of his tale. I never quite found out.

"Do forgive the bird," pleaded Christopher. "He's probably a charming fellow where rabbits aren't concerned. What do you think he feels about human beings who often shoot his sort down—and not for their dinner either? We don't eat rooks and hawks." Impetuously he held out his hand. "Do let's be friends again, Kitting, and please, I'm awfully glad you felt so sad over that baby rabbit, 'cos it shows you're nice and sympathetic. Some day I may be hurt, and then you may be sad over me, and that will be a great comfort. By the way, have you buried the rabbit?"

"No."

"I want to know what you mean by being 'turned into a rabbit,'" said Helen, frowning.

"I'll tell you all about it one day," replied Christopher hastily. "And now let's bury it, shall we?"

"All right," said Helen. "Follow me. Don't you come, Kitting, it'll upset you again."

"No, it won't upset me," Kitting answered slowly, after a deep sniff. "It's dead now, anyway."

So they trooped off. I followed. They found the rabbit again and proceeded to bury it.

"Poor rabbit," said Kitting, as Christopher laid it in the hole he had dug with his hands, "having to have all this earth on his nice soft fur." She stroked its leg with her finger. "Will he be horrid in three months' time?"

"Yes, rather horrid," acknowledged Christopher.

"Will the worms eat him up?"

"Yes, more or less."

"Oh, Kitting, don't be beastly!" exclaimed Helen.

"I'm not beastly, I want to know. He's dead and can't feel any more, and I *have* been frightfully sorry. There's nothing I can do for him now. It can't hurt him if I want to know what happens to his body. Please tell me more."

"I've told you," said Christopher.

"Do ordinary earthworms eat him?"

"No, they're maggots grown out of himself—his dead body. It breeds them."

"Oh, golly! How?"

Christopher explained to her, as simply as he could, about microbes.

The next day, at luncheon, Kitting having related the incident of the bird and the baby rabbit to her father, ended her narrative with: "And, Daddie, d'you know we're covered in teeny, weeny invisible worms, so tiny you couldn't possibly see them? Isn't it funny? And everything is just as wormy as can be. Ugh!" she giggled, "Everything's alive, even dead things. All alive. Only in a different way."

"With a different life," elucidated James, busily cutting his meat.

"Yes, funny," I said.

Christopher had begun his education of Kitting, and Kitting, in her own unconscious way, her education of Christopher.

CHAPTER V

DOWN in the drawing room yesterday morning, Cora, who was maid-of-all work when we first came to this house, covered the best needlework chairs and the china-cabinets with dust sheets. In the afternoon a removal van called to take them up to the storage place, where they will be stored until —until——? Oh, well, an indefinite date. What the future holds for them I do not know, these chairs and cabinets, all too old-fashioned for my children. For Helen's home is pale, clean, tidy, and modern; bleached oak and a parquet floor, light-coloured Persian rugs and modern still-life paintings in her drawing room, so very clean-looking and airy and exquisite. As for Kitting, she hasn't room for my things in her new, tiny abode; barely room for her own.

In the afternoon Cora came to say good-bye to me. She broke down at the last and cried, but it's no use, she has to go. What with the little bit of money James left her and her own savings, she isn't badly off, really, and she is going to live with her sister, who has a cottage in the country; and I

feel pretty certain that, shortly, she will marry her "young man," although she is already thirty-seven. Thirty-seven is Cora, only thirty-seven, good Lord, and yet she has twenty years' service behind her. It seems incredible that, in these days, any comparatively young servant should have remained in one position for twenty years. Latterly she has been somewhat difficult to get on with, quick-tempered, sometimes sulky and apt to want to organize the life of the entire household. For ten years she has been "walking out" with the same "friend"—a certain electrician, unassuming and uninteresting, but quite prosperous enough to keep her; however, habit dies hard with Cora, and nothing less than the breaking-up of this household will cause her to make up her mind about him. She was always conservative, disliking change of any kind, thereby making herself extraordinarily unpopular with the rest of the servants. I found I was always changing my other maids. Cora disapproved heartily of any new labour-saving device I might have wished to install. In her view, the old-fashioned ways and means were best, and these newfangled inventions were merely a pandering to the modern servant's laziness. In consequence, the modern servant has always detested Cora. Small wonder, then, that Helen refuses to have Cora in her house. As for Kitting, she has fought with her, on and off, for the last four years.

She came to say good-bye to me yesterday afternoon, crying, and my thoughts are still full of her. For about twenty-four hours, I shall not be able to banish from my mind's eye her poor, pink face, all crumpled up, crying out of one eye only, her hands in their cheap gray cotton gloves, pressed dolefully together against her broad bosom. She was entirely pitiful; her attire seemed to be composed of fragments that symbolized her long service in this house; her simple ill-fitting navy-blue coat and skirt had been made for her out of one of mine. Her hat had also once belonged to me. Her handbag was a Christmas present from Christopher; an old pair of shoes, once smart and too high heeled, adorned her feet: the toes were now comically and most unsmartly turned upwards, for owing to the fact that high heels were found to be uncomfortable, they had been replaced by flat ones, with the result that the shoes were thrown completely out of balance.

What trivial things one notices and remembers of such emotion-fraught moments. Turned-up toes of Cora's shoes and her thin gray-cotton gloves.

And standing there in the dismantled drawing room, she took out a freshly ironed, large cotton handkerchief and blew her nose loudly. Not trusting herself to speak, she waved in the direction of one of the shrouded needlework chairs. I perceived, presently, that the cause of her emotion lay not in the chair, but in the dust sheet into which it had

been sewn. "Calico Palace!" she finally gulped. "Who'd 'ave thought it? Well, I never!"

I carefully examined the dust sheet and found it to be, in very truth, Calico Palace.

Calico Palace was a home-made tent, at one time Kitting's sanctuary during the warm weather. For several summers it was pitched in the back yard, by means of a few yards of string, some clothes-pegs and a couple of safety-pins. There Kitting did her "work" when she first began to be interested in "scientific" experiments. She was at that time about eleven years old.

I must explain that Kitting's "scientific experiments" got too much for me on the day when she developed a passionate curiosity concerning gases and their fabrication. One afternoon the house was permeated with the odour of acetylene, and thereafter I determined to banish my daughter into the garden if she wished to continue her researches. I bought her a dozen yards of calico and told her to rig herself up an outdoor laboratory. At first she grumbled, then she found it fun. She named her tent "Calico Palace," and it became her sanctuary. Then one day it rained. She cried. What the dickens was the use of Calico Palace as a lab? Everything was spoiled, ruined. Her sand, her salt, her paper, her this, her that. Wouldn't anyone understand she was serious and couldn't be interfered with? We were all idiots, we meant well, but we were cruel in our

ignorance. Her bits of iron, her spirit-stove, her weights, etcetera, couldn't be carted out-of-doors from her room and back again every day; would we *never* understand? Somewhat at a loss, I apologized for my stupidity, but at the same time expostulated with her about the smells. I couldn't have those smells in the house. Wasn't it possible for her to use Calico Palace for the smells and the attic for everything else? She replied impatiently that it was like asking me to play the piano *pianissimo* only, on our piano, and to go out and play *fortissimo* somewhere else. Christopher, present at this despairing outburst, laughed sympathetically.

"Don't laugh!" she cried. "You mayn't be keen any more, but *I am,* and I want to get on with it!"

"Oh, keep your sense of humour," retorted Christopher. "I'm *not* laughing at you but at what you're saying. I see your point perfectly." He stopped abruptly, then: "I've got an idea. Those smells wouldn't disturb anyone if the attic door closed properly and felt was put around the cracks."

"Well?"

"Let's rig up a real lab in the attic. I'll help. We'll get everything to make it smell-proof as far as the rest of the house is concerned, and we'll only work out our formulas and the pencil and paper bits in Calico Palace. You know—the calculations and things."

"We?"

"Yes, I'm joining, if you let me. I'm sure that's a good idea. Leave it to me, funny-face, and your cross mamma won't have any more to complain of. First of all, we'll buy some felt and tack it round the attic door; then we'll get some decent instruments and some proper test tubes and beakers. Is gas laid on in the attic?"

"No," said Kitting solemnly. Suddenly she smiled and the next moment she gave a gurgle of excitement. Her eyes began to dance, and she clasped her hands, "Oh, but it *could* be; so much better than a spirit stove. Oh, Christopher, we'd have a real lab! Oh, you are a pet to help me; and Calico Palace could be a sort of extra place—oh, Christopher, do you really mean it? You're not just pretending?" Christopher laughed, too, to see her joy. "Of course I'm not. We'll work out a lot of things that way. By the way, there are several things I want to show you. I've watched you working one or two things out the long way round. Now, for instance, if you want to work out why . . ."

Alas, here my ignorance prevents me from setting down exactly how Kitting was to find out what. The two of them went into strange details, in a language sufficiently technical to be quite obscure to me. I will not even try to describe their conversation; I would only make a fool of myself if I did so. They talked at great length, and Kitting eagerly asked a lot of questions.

After this they very often held very long conversations on similarly obscure subjects. Christopher, at that time, started to help the child with her lessons, added to which they would set themselves problems, for their own amusement, and sit for hours in Calico Palace, solving them. They were together a great deal. Kitting's antipathy for him was melting away, under my eyes, and I was very relieved to see it. I would hear Kitting's voice, for instance: "Let's do this, come on. Now: seventeen men are constructing a railway line across this stretch of land. Across this stretch, only eleven men are competing, by building another. Each man of the seventeen works ten and a half hours per day. How many hours will each of the eleven men have to work in order to get to this point" (here Kitting would pause in order to draw a cross) "at the same time as the seventeen men?"

"Coming from over here?"

"Hu-hm."

"But that's further away anyway?"

"Is it? Where's the compass? Here. Look. It's not. Deceptive, isn't it? Ha-ha!" she chuckled. "I thought I'd get you that way!" And so on. I sat outside Calico Palace in my wicker chair, trying to read, but unable to concentrate, listening to this kind of thing and marvelling. Another time it would be angles of so many degrees and circles and points, and another time X's and Y's pluses and minuses,

and A's squaring B's that left my brain in a whirl, and, to me, sounded like so much gibberish.

James began work on *Corpse Mountain* early in September, 1922. By that time Calico Palace was no longer a laboratory; it had been turned into a tea tent. On fine days James would sit at a small card table in Calico Palace and write his novel. No one disturbed him; Helen, Kitting, and Oliver were back at school, and we were both often quite alone during the day. But not always.

There was, for instance, Janet M——, who was Kitting's best friend. She was fourteen years old, unusually attractive and intelligent, and far too intense to be a happy child. Her intensity and vitality equalled Christopher's; her vanity exceeded Helen's. Her egotism was comparable with James's and Kitting's. Her talent was remarkable, even in those days. She is one of the few people who, phenomenally talented during their childhood, have not proved a disappointment in their maturity. Her good looks have not, as in the case of Helen, waylaid her; but then she possesses a clearer, sharper, and more crystalline intelligence than Helen, much as I hate to admit it. She fascinated me, and I still maintain that she is the only young woman of my acquaintance who possesses the particular glamour that one associates with certain women of history. She took herself and her writing seriously—to the point of absurdity. She was genuinely fond of me,

in her peculiar, grateful, unreserved fashion. Like Christopher, she adored music with a kind of physical passion, and she loved me as the purveyor of that passion.

Janet no longer went to school, at the age of fourteen; she attended classes on certain mornings, and the rest of her time she worked at her writing —in those days a long narrative poem, entitled "The Grove." (A revised version of "The Grove" was published five years later by Peabody & Hootes, for whom Oliver is now working.) She wrote most of "The Grove," either in our back garden or in the drawing room, and read it out aloud to me as it progressed. She told me that if it had not been for my piano playing (such as it was), she could never have written a line of it. I think she once had a *Schwärmerei* for me, but that did not last very long. She had lost a devoted mother through pneumonia a few years before, and, I suppose, found a vague kind of substitute for her in me. Her father had been killed in the war, and she lived with a much older married sister, who doted on her and thought her a genius, but who, obviously, owing to her years, could hardly replace a mother.

Janet and Kitting were friends because they met on equal terms. They had a whole-hearted respect and admiration for each other, they stood firmly on their own ground, and they could not hurt one another, because they were both perfectly armed. They

had a wealth of subjects to discuss; both were keen amateur philosophers, and both loved books, music, and human beings. Janet was utterly certain she wanted to be a woman of letters; in her mind there was not the shadow of a doubt as to what she meant to do with her life. Kitting was equally sure of her own career. As a matter of fact, she had never once, as a child, faltered in her choice. Janet said: "I've got to write. I often feel that things only happen to me that I may write of them. If I didn't write, everything would seem futile." Kitting said: "I've got to find things out. I've got to know *why* everything. It's the only thing worth doing, for me, finding out *why*."

James and Janet became friends because Janet understood James, and he appreciated her comprehension of him. She, in her turn, was flattered by this friendship with a much older man. He picked her to pieces coolly and kindly, and she submitted to his analysis with the greatest good cheer and gratitude. I had never met anyone who could discuss herself, and listen to a discussion of which she was the subject, with such extraordinary frankness and lack of embarrassment. She was deeply interested in herself, and it did not make her unlikable; one felt she saw herself as a personality. someone to write about, and that the better she knew that self, the less liable she would be to make mistakes in general character drawing.

"Janet," said James, one day while we were all having tea in the garden, "you say you feel things only happen to you that you may write of them. Isn't that the wrong way round? Doesn't that make you a kind of—let me see—a kind of, let us say, journalist, rather than a creative artist? You surely don't mean that you allow everything to appeal to you only in terms of literature, as a newspaper reporter will see a press story in the greatest tragedy?"

"Oh, no!" she cried.

"Then what do you mean?"

"I mean that I think I am going to have a very strange and eventful life, that I'm going to get a lot out of it, and that if I can't give something for all I'm getting, I'll burst."

"Altruism? The desire to give? Are you sure?"

Janet, who was sitting on a cushion on the grass, bit her nails and frowned. "No," she replied, "and now you've muddled me. Let me see. I love writing, and if I couldn't write I'd be miserable. I have long thinks, I love and hate things—and I want to tell. I must tell. And I find it simplest to tell in words."

"Ah," said James, "self-expression. The desire for self-expression. But that's not what you said in the beginning, my dear."

"It's what I meant."

"But you didn't say it. You put it quite differently."

"I suppose I did. I'm sorry. I must learn to think more clearly. And yet, I'm sure that when I think more clearly I'll not write any better verse. It's astonishing how little thinking has got to do with verse. Verse sort of comes out of the blue—the ideas do. Especially when Aunt Elsa plays the piano. Music helps. It's the rhythm or something—I don't know."

"Don't you ever want to write prose?" asked James.

"Oh, yes. Later. I suppose I shall write novels when I know something about life. I don't know anything about life yet. I don't care. Plenty of time. I've got my soul to explore now. I expect when things happen to me, outside things, travelling and falling in love and things like that, I'll write novels about those things; I expect they'll fog my dream things, and I'll push my creative imagination to one side and write hard prose about *happenings*. Real life and all that."

"You can write poetry about real life," murmured Helen.

"Can you?" Janet replied, "I don't think I could."

"Why not?" asked Kitting, who was lying on a rug at my feet. "You ought to be able to."

"No," said Janet, chewing her thumb nail cruelly.

"Don't bite your nails," said Kitting sharply.

"No," pursued Janet, without paying the slight-

est attention to Kitting, and continuing to gnaw, "if a thing is matter-of-fact, something that's not only out of one's feelings, it's best written in prose."

"Poetry is there to express things that are so vague, so—so 'smoky' that they simply *couldn't* be written in prose, prose would be too heavy for them."

James took off his spectacles, wiped them, and chuckled. "I predict you'll not write a line of poetry after you're eighteen. Already you think too much, and your facility is too great. Your poems, even now, are tinged with philosophy. You know too much, my girl—or you think you do. You're too good at tabulating and pigeonholing."

"Oh, I'm not!" she cried fiercely.

James suddenly leant back in his chair and laughed. "One thing is certain," he exclaimed, "and that is that you are the most complete and frank egotist that ever was seen!"

Janet blushed, somewhat discomfited. She looked at me appealingly. "No one discourages me, at any rate," she whispered to me; "they lead me on and on—and then laugh at me."

"Dear girl," James replied, amused, "you don't take much encouraging. For one second I actually thought we were going to wander off into a discussion of poetry and prose, but skilfully you guided us back to Janet and her writing again!"

"Daddie, it was you who guided her back again," Kitting defended her friend. "Be fair!"

"Thank you, Kitting," said Janet, relieved.

"You're good to tease," Kitting went on. "You take it well. You never seem to get hurt or offended."

Janet raised her eyebrows. She seemed pleased. Then she caught sight of James's face and impatiently picked up a cushion and flung it at Kitting. "Oh, shut up, Kitting! Come off *me,* will you? There you are! At it again."

"Sorry!" said Kitting, beginning to laugh. She hurled the cushion back at Janet, then stood up and pulled Janet up too. "Come on, Daddie wants to write. Daddie, you're a bad man to have stolen Calico Palace from me like that. Now, I've got to do *all* my stinks in the attic!"

"My dear, it's getting so chilly, I shan't be able to use your Calico Palace much longer," James answered, rising and making for the tent, where a table and chair had been placed for him.

"Oh, I'm only pretending," laughed Kitting, tossing her head. "I don't want Calico Palace; you're welcome, Daddie-boy."

"Coo-coo," came a voice from the drawing-room window. It was Christopher. He waved to us.

"We're coming in," Helen called to him.

Janet touched my arm: "Aunt Elsa, are you going to play to us?" she asked. I was about to demur,

but she clasped her hands and begged: "Aunt Elsa, please." I noticed that her hands were so tightly interlocked that the knuckles showed white. She held her breath. I felt uncomfortable.

"Janet," I said, "you simply must take things more quietly. Look at you. Don't be so intense, for goodness' sake. You are only asking me to play the piano, after all. Don't get so worked up about it. As Kitting would say, you're using a steam hammer to crack an egg!"

She slipped an arm around my waist. "Oh, but I'm so afraid you won't play. And I want you to so much. Please do. I'm stuck with 'The Grove,' and I know I'll come unstuck, if you play."

Up in the drawing room Kitting and Christopher held the floor. Microscopes. Comparative weights. Then acids, I think, or something like that. Everything that meant nothing to Helen, Janet, and me. They talked eagerly; Kitting was very excited over some instrument or other that Christopher had just brought home for their laboratory.

"Play," insisted Janet in a whisper.

"What's that?" asked Christopher.

"I want her to play," muttered Janet.

"Oh, yes," he cried. "Please, Elsa."

I opened the piano. In the front hall the telephone bell rang after I had played the first few bars of a study by Scriabine. Helen wanted to answer it. She returned after a few seconds. "Mrs. Anderson

wants to talk to you—about a garden party on Thursday or something. I couldn't quite make out——"

"Oh, hell, your mother is out!" snapped Christopher.

"No, no!" I protested, and rose to deal with Mrs. Anderson and her garden party. Mrs. Anderson, whose loquacity nothing seemed able to check, rang off after seven minutes. I returned to the drawing room and began to play again. By then it was half-past six. The moment I finished the Scriabine study, the house-parlourmaid entered, and coming over to me, whispered: "Please, Madam, cook would like to know about what time she's to put on the fish, and should she make a white sauce, or will you yourself make a sauce?"

"Put on the fish now, and tell cook I'll make the sauce," I returned, my hands still on the keyboard.

"Oh, blood, blood, blood!" groaned Christopher. I laughed.

"Christopher, you'd hate to go without your dinner, wouldn't you? So would James and all of us."

"Oh, yes, I know," retorted Christopher. "And in the morning it's getting the girls off to school, and then the household shopping, counting the laundry —anything else?"

"There's always something," said Janet. "It's a shame!"

Kitting stretched herself and said: "Sorry, everybody, but I've got some prep to do."

"Oh, hang, so have I," added Helen, pulling a face. "I'll do mine after dinner."

"Oh, no, you won't," mocked Kitting. "You won't do it at all, and then to-morrow, as it's for the day after, Janet will do your English composition and French for you, and Christopher or I your sums and geometry. Or else you'll make up some marvellous story as to why you couldn't manage it! A cousin's wedding or funeral or something!"

Helen went pink with annoyance. "Aren't you a darling!" she snapped.

"Shut up, you little hell cats," drawled Christopher, and cuffed Kitting over the head. Kitting said, "Hi!" and punched him in the chest.

"I must go home," sighed Janet.

"Stay to supper," I said.

"No, Madelaine will be upset; she says she sees too little of me, as it is. I really must go. May I come to-morrow?"

"Of course. Good-bye, darling."

Christopher mimicked me: " 'Christopher, will *you* stay to supper?' Yes, thanks, Elsa, I'd love to. 'I'm so glad, I'd love you to stay, Christopher.' " Then, in imitation of Janet: " 'I'd love to stay, your playing inspires me, it stimulates the phagocytes——' "

"What are the phagocytes, anyway?" asked Kitting.

Christopher looked solemn. "Perhaps when you're older," he replied, "and you're very, very good, we'll attempt to analyze and explain phagocytes to you. In the meantime, let it suffice that phagocytes are the cause of, and are found——"

"In Bernard Shaw, chiefly, aren't they?" Janet helped him, smiling.

"Oh, swank," Christopher declared, "thy name is Janet. But, that, my dear, Miss Knowall, is where you go wrong. Phagocytosis is not an invention of George Bernard's, but of the Lord God Almighty's, praise be to Him for it——"

"What I want to know," I interrupted, "is who is staying to supper. Christopher, yes. Janet?"

"Afraid not. Good-bye, darling." And Janet kissed me and departed.

"Homework. So long, everybody!" exclaimed Kitting briskly, and followed Janet to the door. Helen moodily picked up a book. She stood by the window, undetermined for a moment, then also left the room. I heard her go upstairs. I guessed she would curl up in the armchair in the nursery and try to read. She would not read. She would think, not clearly, but passionately and miserably, thoughts tinged with emotion, with bitterness and hopelessness. With a kind of restless weariness she would chase her unfruitful reflections round and round her

head, spending on them the effort she should give to her homework. She would think that the intense driving force of Janet's temperament, the ruthless way in which Janet respected her own talent, was the last straw to break the back of her own frail ability to write verses. Janet was terrible for Helen. Janet ground out her lines with an uncanny aim at perfection. Helen, whose imagination was fertile enough, had not the will power to slave and drudge at polishing her verses. Consequently they suffered by comparison with Janet's. Helen would grow heartsick at her contemplation of Kitting: of Kitting's mulish patience and aptitude for her favourite work, her high spirits and her self-contained air of happiness. And, last but not least, Helen would envy —a secret envy from herself—Kitting's and Christopher's developing comradeship. She would then compare her lot to Oliver's, Oliver at school, finding it so easy to get on with everyone, to be normal, sociable, truth-telling and a good boy. She would hate Christopher for a few minutes for usurping her place as my lieutenant, because, until the advent of Christopher, it was she who had done most of the fetching and carrying in the house, had answered the telephone for me, had run my errands, and in a hundred little useful ways had made herself indispensable to my comforts.

I imagined it all, but I sat there on the piano stool unable to do anything for her. I had talked to her

often enough. Child as she was, I felt, wearily, that I could not help her: she must learn to help herself.

Christopher's voice roused me: "At it again, Mother!"

I smiled at him and shook my head. He took my hand and smiled back. "Mother," he said, "you are the best hider I know. Life, for you, is a perpetual game of hide-and-seek—and you as the hider. Every now and again I see you, Elsa, then—zip! You vanish and Mother appears, hidden completely by Helen and Kitting and Oliver. And as if that weren't enough, you must go out and find another brat. Janet. What does she want here all the time, anyway?"

"What you wanted, my dear friend. Warmth, understanding, sympathy."

Christopher's eyes narrowed, and he grasped my hand, which he was still holding so tightly that I gasped. He broke into a laugh. "Hiding again." All at once he spoke my name in a voice so peculiar that it startled me. It was the kind of tone one might use in a dark room if the lights suddenly went out.

"Elsa!"

I did not answer. There was a long dark silence.

"Elsa," came his voice again. "May I tell you the truth?"

Another silence. Then, laughing, I called out 'No!" and started to play (badly and hitting many

wrong notes) to try to make further conversation impossible.

"Then don't let's have music," he begged, "for one's loveliest moments should always be set to music. It colours everything. It's like wine, it frees one too much, makes one too reckless. This oughtn't to be a lovely moment, and yet I want to tell you the truth. The truth could be hard, but if you play like that it will be softer, and this will be, for me, one of the lovely moments. Oh, hell!" he broke off, "go on playing! Go on playing! Then at least we can pretend it wasn't the truth, afterwards!"

I went on playing. I could say nothing.

"Elsa," he continued, "you said, two years ago, that where I came from there was only death and non-death. You knew a lot. There was death tomorrow, anyway, so one took *exactly* what one wanted and sent the price to blazes. Dead men have no debts. People were generous to one. Men gave their friendship, their comradeship, women their love. It was that hectic business of the condemned man's last request, and so on. I got back to England and expected to take everything I wanted. I couldn't see why one shouldn't have every trifle. I was greedy of living. I couldn't see why one shouldn't satisfy every desire—life was so short. I couldn't see why people put silly self-made obstacles of convention between themselves and their desires. In short,

I was uncivilized. Then, you, of all people, began to recivilize me."

"I?"

"You were the first creature I'd met who seemed clear of trash. But when I got near—you hid and became the mother. Elsa, why?"

I stopped playing abruptly. "Christopher, what do you want, my dear?"

"God knows."

"Listen, Christopher, dear, dear Christopher. I am a respectable married woman with three children, the eldest of whom is fourteen; my excellent husband, the sight of whom rends my heart, lost his health in the war; he has an important career, is writing a great book. You are under thirty. Christopher, you can come and eat at my table and sleep under my roof. There is room for you in my house, even in my life. You have meant so much to me. But, forgive me, dear Christopher, I simply cannot be allowed to mean more. Christophers simply don't happen to wives of war invalids and the mothers of three children. They just don't appear on the horizon. You haven't been allowed to appear on mine. That, too, is a truth, *my* truth. I'm not sorry to have adopted you. I have civilized you, you say. Well, let this talk be the final act of civilizing. Neither you nor I are going to die quite to-morrow, so we owe something to those around us."

"God, I wish we didn't! Do we? Are you sure?"

"I think we do."

"Oh, God, stop talking like a textbook! 'Duty to society!' "

"No," I said, "only to Helen, Kitting, and Oliver. And, my dear, to you."

"Rats!" He sat down dejectedly on a stool and leant his elbows on his knees. "Elsa," he said presently, "I wish we hadn't had this talk. I only said what you knew, and you told me what I fully realized long ago. Let's consider it untalked."

"Yes, Christopher, you're quite right."

"Oh, well," he said, after a while, rising heavily, "I'll go and help Kitting with her sums." By the door, he added, "I like Kitting. She's got a shining soul and a shining mind. No beastly nooks and crannies where the dirt can get in and stick."

"Yes, go to Kitting. She needs you."

Again he laughed. He shook his head. "No," he said, "she needs no one, bless her little heart. Not really even me for her lessons. She's got a happy nature. She's a brick."

At that moment James entered the room and nearly bumped into Christopher. "Hullo," said Christopher, and, "Ah, good-evening," said James. James rubbed his hands and said, "It's chilly in the evenings now." Then, "Has Janet gone?"

"Her sister expected her back, she had to go."

"Ah," said James without expression. His "Ah" might have meant anything. I looked at his eyes be-

hind their horn-rimmed glasses. They met my gaze, and I could read nothing. He smiled slightly. "Yes?" he inquired. I shook my head. "Nothing, my dear," I replied, "I thought perhaps you were going to say something."

Christopher said, "See you later," and went in search of Kitting. James crossed over to the window and looked out.

"Janet enthralls me," I ventured. "I never really knew her till this term, since she left school and comes here instead."

"Hm," returned James, noncommittally, "intelligent child. She'll do a lot or go absolutely wrong. I can't believe there isn't a catch; she's good-looking too, you see. She'll be interesting to watch."

"What do you like the best about her?"

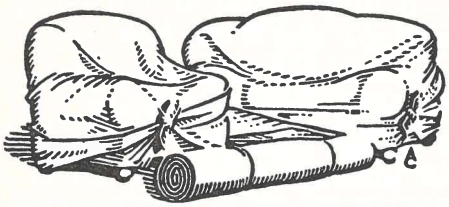
"I think her passionate, ruthless sincerity. I hope she keeps it." He paused, then, apropos of nothing, "I think Calico Palace ought to come down now. It's too chilly to sit out there this time of year. It's no use to Kitting at present, and it can go up again in the spring."

I nodded.

So Calico Palace was unpinned, unsewn, and unpegged, and sent to the laundry. It was put up again next spring, and again the next. Then it became two dust sheets, and the drawing room furniture was

covered by it during the month that we went away for our summer holiday.

And lately it was cut into four pieces and the best chairs sewn into it before being sent to the store-rooms.



CHAPTER VI

I OFTEN wonder whether it is spring, autumn, or midwinter that is the most melancholy time of year; whether the milestone which marks the passing of each year is when tender buds sit upon the trees in the park and one says, "Another spring," or when the curled gray leaves chase one another down the street on Armistice Day, or again when one is buying bundles of holly and mistletoe for Christmas celebrations. There is definitely an annual period when the march of Time makes itself more actutely felt than usual. No, it is not the springtime. Each spring clutches at my heartstrings, lightens my step, causes me to forget my identity by filling me with a wonder so distinct that I seem never to have known it before. There have been times when I have been too preoccupied to spare more than a passing nod to the season unfolding itself, and this I have always resented. That anything so precious as the spring should pass me by without my being able to drink it in and enjoy it at my leisure! And yet I have seen people take it for granted, as they take Life itself for granted, without marvelling at all; country dwellers so blasé that

they take their tea indoors on a sunny day. Of course, it is only natural that they should; they can hardly be expected to live in a permanent state of ecstasy. They can scarcely understand that I, loving the very smell, the very *thought* of the grass and soil and of the sunlight, should want to hoard my sensation against future dull days in town. Dear, dear Life of the Earth! Only a town dweller could love you as I love you, a trifle sadly, like a lover parted from his beloved. And soon, very subtly too soon, the new spring turns to summer, and I never seem to notice it. I never notice the change in the season, that the early summer has replaced the late spring, that the year has ripened to full summer until the autumn is already there. And only then do I grow sad and reflect that yet another year has sped and that, possibly, I have not lived it fully enough. This realization comes creeping stealthily as the days grow shorter and the Hunter's Moon climbs clearly, frostily, into a brightly starry sky—and for the first time I must send for a shawl to put about my shoulders when I sit in the garden after dinner, for the dew comes more suddenly and with more chilliness. And when I walk through woods in the daytime and the sun is pale and tepid, a kind of horribly sweet anguish possesses me at the sight of the yellow leaves turning to orange on the beech trees and at the smell of wood smoke rising to my nostrils. If I could write verse I should write it best

in autumn, and if I were a composer, I could conceive my masterpieces at this time of the year, for it stirs me most, more than the spring. It stirs me more profoundly, its touch is more forceful, and the landmarks of my life more noticeable. For first Helen grows too tall, this year, to be sent back to school after the holidays wearing short socks, and then Kitting, and before I know where I am, they are both "my girls" instead of my children, and both turning into flappers with long black legs and little Louis heels to their shoes, instead of flat square ones. And one day Helen falls in love. And yet there is something foolish in my heart that has not quite changed since I was a little over their age —since the day I broke my heart for the first time over Francis Kennedy. Suddenly it comes over me with a rush, a terrible, painful, poignant wave of memory that carries me away as a big sea wave might carry one away, back to those exciting days when one was so certainly the centre of one's own universe; and it all seems so near, it might be yesterday, or even an hour or two ago, so clear does it all seem. . . .

How cruel are the young! Even the sweetest and kindest of them! Their very consideration and respect is cruelty in itself, and the heartache of the middle-aged is inexplicable. It is not that I shun old age, or that I have shunned middle age. It is that something in my spirit has refused to alter, and that

it is supposed to have altered; something ought to have dulled that never has dulled; a flame that should no longer be alight still flickers rebelliously. And yet I am labelled "late forties" and "ought to know better." What can one do about it? I feel I ought to wander around apologizing for my existence. What is this unutterable self-consciousness that overwhelms middle-aged mothers?

And now the autumn is turning into full winter. There will be no Christmas for me this year. Not what I call Christmas. Christmas is essentially the children's time, and I have no more children. Obstinately, and contrary to the theory that a mother always remains a mother, I declare that I have no more children. Many years ago I bore Helen, Kitting, and Oliver; and now they are grown-up citizens and lead their own lives, and I have no further claim on them, no right to tie them down to my own sentimentalities. Kitting and Oliver are going to Switzerland and Helen to stay with her fiancé's people. I shall be rid of this house, and I am not yet sure what I shall do. For some time now we have enjoyed no real Christmas festivities here, the last time being when we had what we always refer to now as "The Cats' Christmas" about eight years ago.

(Incidentally, talking of cats, what am I going to do with Job, pathetic, sleepy, twelve-year-old-cat? I suppose he ought to be sent to a Cats' Home to

be put to sleep, but I somehow shirk this cold-blooded method of disposing of him. He is the son of Semiramis, a half-Persian, who walked into this house as a kitten one day during the winter of 1920, and elected to remain until her death, due to rat-poisoning, in 1927. In the interval she bore forty-three kittens, of which Job alone remained permanently with us. The actual owner of Semiramis was Kitting, who only cuddled but never fed her, but Job was my kitten from the first. . . .)

In every respect the Christmas of 1922 was our usual somewhat conventional family Christmas. On Christmas morning breakfast was always served in the dining room, at a later hour than usual, and often friends were invited; for it was quite an important meal on that day. Luncheon was a neglected business, but dinner a great affair. All presents were given to me as a matter of course, and I arranged them carefully around the breakfast table. (It was great fun one Christmas when Helen received a huge doll from her father; there being no room for it on the table, it was seated in her chair and almost overlooked by her.) The servants also joined in the family festivities. All their gifts were placed on a table in the corner of the dining room. Then I would slip off into the drawing room and play a carol on the piano, and that was the signal for the waiting children, friends, and domestics to rush into the dining room and claim their presents. Even

Semiramis and her kittens were brought in. But the Christmas to which I am referring was distinguished by the fact that we had a tree (small, but nicely decorated with silver-wrapped sweets) in the middle of the table. We all agreed that it was nonsense, having a tree on the table for breakfast, because, however small, it took up too much room and we all argued loudly about its hangings, but we liked our nonsense. Helen and Janet wanted ornaments and tinsel, Kitting wanted it hung with pickled onions and gherkins (her favourite form of food), Oliver with sweets (he won in the end), and Christopher said that sample bottles of liqueur would be a capital idea. "I dare say the cats' ideal would be a tree entirely hung with sprats and sardines," he remarked.

"That's a thought," said Kitting. "Poor pussies, they never understand what all the fuss is about; they get no Christmas at all. Can't one do something for them—an extra large saucer of milk or something?"

For Kitting, in an access of enthusiasm, assumed an air of proprietorship over, not only Semiramis, but also her entire brood of piebald kittens.

Cora, who had by that time risen to the dignity of a cook, complained bitterly of the way in which Semiramis and her offspring haunted the kitchen. She was always tripping over one or the other of them during the course of her labours; Semiramis

would sharpen her claws against the leg of the kitchen table while she was preparing the meat for dinner, and the kittens got under one's feet "so it was a fair scramble to get anything done. But there! Poor little animals, they couldn't help being 'ungry," and if one wanted to drown any of "those dratted kittens" at birth, why, then, "Aw! What a shame! Such *sweet* little pussies, someone would surely like to have a nice little pet, perhaps the butcher boy's people or the drapers in Henry Street. . . ."

In the face of Cora's protestations, we never had the heart to destroy them at birth, and disposing of them was an ever present problem throughout the year. At Christmas the smell of food intoxicated them. A veritable chorus of miauing would accompany the preparation of each meal—and Cora nearly driven to distraction! But she was unwaveringly sentimental and grew almost lachrymose over every kitten we were able to give away. Sometimes we were not entirely rid of one batch before the other arrived. And such was the case that year. One lovely white mother cat and six hideous piebalds, of various sizes, had the run of the house.

On Christmas Day Christopher, determined to give the cats a merry Yuletide, drove up to our door in a taxi-cab and entered the house bearing a medium-sized tree entirely hung with sardines and sprats. All the afternoon we sat in the dining-room and watched the five felines leaping about, paws out-

stretched, necks craned forward, ready to pounce upon their quarry. By tea-time that afternoon, the cats' Christmas provided us with a new gambling game; each of us "backed" one cat or kitten against another. I "backed" the mother cat, Semiramis, against her largest kitten, Job, whose patron was Christopher. It was a most exciting game and Semiramis won, after a hard fight, for her son was an agile puss, wiry and light-footed. So occupied were we with our wonderful new game that we failed to notice the absence of Helen and of Oliver's school friend, Giles, a boy of about her own age, who was staying in the house with us.

Giles came of people who were very well off. His father, a celebrated industrialist, had been knighted after the war. Giles's people had a place in the Midlands, not very large, not at all lovely, I gathered, but very full of servants. He did not appear to like his father, and his mother hardly seemed to exist for him; his home meant comparatively little to Giles. He and Oliver were firm friends, and he obviously enjoyed being with us. He had never met either of my girls before and immediately made friends with Helen. Friends, did I say? No. Christopher and Kitting had become friends, and the relationship existing between Giles and Helen did not in any way resemble Christopher's and Kitting's.

Giles was of a type new to me; an unserious romantic, if I may put it like that. He was exceed-

ingly, unbelievably precocious; a perfect embryo young man-about-town. He danced marvellously (in fact, he taught Helen to fox-trot and one-step; she already knew how to waltz quite well) and dressed with an air, allowed one to guess he read poetry and quoted excerpts from Byron, Baudelaire's *Fleurs du Mal* and Rupert Brooke. It amused me vastly to watch him, and if only he had had nothing to do with my children, I would have liked him quite a lot. As it was, I find it a little hard to forgive him. . . . But I really must not start this story back to front.

Giles at seventeen was undeniably "the father of the man" he later became: tall, olive skinned, sleek, black haired, with languid, deep green hazel eyes and a sullen mouth over which he was already trying to persuade a few soft black hairs to form a moustache. When first I met him, his appearance shocked me. He was so dangerous looking! His romantic, picturesque handsomeness slightly frightened me; but he was quiet and did not show off or talk a lot, and Oliver liked him.

Helen, at fifteen and a half years of age, was very nearly beautiful. She, too, was a romantic, only she did not know it. She loved being beautiful and was already fond of dress; but her taste inclined more towards the picturesque than the smart. Janet M—— wore rather picturesque clothes, and Helen copied her. I let her have her own way over her

clothes, and she did not betray my confidence by indulging in exaggerations, either of picturesqueness or extravagance.

The day on which she and Giles first met (four days before Christmas) she was wearing a black velvet dress which became her wonderfully. Helen had not yet lost her heart to anyone, and I was always half waiting for her to do so. She did so that afternoon, after one glance at Giles; and she did so in response to the stare of frank admiration she received from him the moment he set eyes on her. "Ho, ho," thought I, half amused and half apprehensive. "What have we here?" And I watched carefully, and very benignly, I hope, for I found these two rather sweet, so young and innocent, and both feeling so grown-up! I doubted vaguely whether I particularly wanted them left alone together for any length of time, because, for some reason, I didn't want Helen kissed, not yet, at any rate—and Giles looked as if he might kiss her at the earliest opportunity. On the other hand, he might not. I misjudged him. I misjudged them both. Fortunately theirs was not to be that kind of love affair. Both their heads were full of romantic literature, and they were of an age when a kiss is such a tremendous gift, either to bestow or to receive, that it is only exchanged after much consideration and forethought, talk and cross-talk, understanding and misunderstanding. Helen was too

romantic to waste her first kiss on anyone but a specially chosen true-lover. I think they both wanted to have a fine, great, and overwhelming love; it was more romantic to have that kind of affair. I imagine Giles wanted it to be unhappy. The last thing either of them desired was a flirtation. To Helen, at fifteen, a frank flirtation was cheap; to Giles it was meaningless. I believe he was actually anxious to have his heart broken, because a broken heart was artistic. As to whether he felt any emotion at all deeply, I am still quite uncertain; but it is to his credit that he obviously wanted to feel it. Helen, on the other hand, was utterly sincere. Giles attracted her, and she was prepared to be gay if not frivolous about it. It was simply that "canoodling" was "not decent," so she must first be certain she loved before she kissed. She had often remarked upon the habits of our housemaid, who was to be seen hugging the grocer's assistant before turning in on her evenings out. Disgusting, she found it, where Kitting shrugged her shoulders and said it was their own business.

On Christmas afternoon I rose and went in search of these two children. They were in the drawing room. Helen, in her black velvet dress, was seated by the window; Giles, at her feet, was making a pencil drawing of her. They were both so completely happy that, as I saw them, something clutched at my heart. I felt mean to disturb them. So I said:

"Oh, there you are!" as gaily as I could and prepared to retire; but Helen detained me. "Mummie, look what Giles is doing! Isn't he clever? I wish I could draw."

I looked, and there, to be sure, was a quite creditable likeness, in profile, of my eldest daughter. I praised the work, but Giles tossed his head in self-disdain.

"It's awfully kind of you," he said to me. "But I know it's feeble." He added carelessly: "It's frightfully good of Helen to sit for me like this when she might be having fun with you all and the cats in the dining room."

"Oh, I'm not a bit kind. I like sitting," protested the guileless Helen. However, her natural coquetry prompted her to continue: "It's *you* who flatter me by asking me to sit, when you could be playing in the next room."

Giles did not answer, but blushed fiercely; and Helen, humming to herself, gazed out of the window.

Four days after Christmas, Giles left for his home to spend the New Year with his family. He took with him his pencil drawing of Helen, and left with her a caricature of himself, drawn by himself in Chinese ink—also the ability to fox-trot really well.

That night, when I went to kiss her good-night, in bed, I found her lying on her back, staring straight

up at the ceiling, an unshed tear standing in each blue eye. I sat on the bed and looked at her for a long time, and she did not move. I could not speak; my heart was too utterly full. At last I gathered her into my arms and held her to me, her warm, wet cheek pressed to mine, and gently rocked her. And neither of us spoke a single word.

CHAPTER VII

ALL those old dresses in that big black trunk ought to be burned or sold or given away. Yet I cannot bear to part with them. Helen's, Kitting's, and Oliver's first baby dresses. Oliver's first sailor suit. And that famous black velvet dress of Helen's that she wore when Giles fell in love with her. It was afterwards altered—made "modern" for Kitting, but it was never really Kitting's kind of dress. There is a peach-coloured evening frock, too bizarre to sell or to be of use to anybody, which Helen had copied from one of Janet's. Janet, for about three years, had contracted Victorianism in dress, like a kind of disease. At one time she even had cord put in the hem of her skirts to make them stick out and look like hoops. James teased her unmercifully in his quiet, ironical way. He considered her Victorianism, he told her, as part of her development: at the time she was following the romantic tradition. She maintained it was an escape for her from the awkwardness of her age. She said: "I hate being a demi-child. When I assert myself, I'm told I'm too young to speak; at other times I hear 'I ought to know better.' "

"So you have decided not to face the situation at all?" James suggested, smiling and nodding his head, "and constantly act this part of the old-fashioned maiden—walk about in fancy dress and are not yourself at all?"

"I am myself!" protested Janet with her customary vehemence. "Just because I like Tennyson and Browning and Schumann, and prefer the charm of their period to the harshness of . . . of . . . other periods," she finished lamely.

"Well?"

"And," she added, "really because I hate wearing my waistline around my posterior!"

James chuckled. "That's not a very Victorian way of speaking!"

"But I don't care, I tell you! I like romantic clothes. I like romantic poetry—and romantic music. That's all I know or care about. Please leave me alone!"

But it did not end there. As I said, Helen copied her. For my own part, I think the two girls' inoffensive picturesqueness got rid of the "flapper" difficulty very well indeed. If they chose to wear their short hair in ringlets, and their belts around their waists instead of, as Janet said, around their posteriors, it only improved them. A girl past her childhood and before her womanhood can only look pretty or a fright: it is impossible for her to be smart unless she is to look pitifully sophisticated and

old for her age. Prettiness is the obvious loophole for her, and, in any case, her prerogative; for I have always found prettiness in older women insipid.

Giles's people came to London in the middle of March and took a house in Belgravia for four months. During the Easter holidays they gave a *thé dansant* and a "Cinderella" dance for Giles and his younger brother. They were Helen's first dances. She was tremendously excited over them, especially as, for her first tea dance, she had a new dress. It was made of flounced scarlet silk, and was the least childish dress she had ever owned. For the evening dance she wore the peach-coloured garment already mentioned. Oliver and she went to the tea dance alone, but to the "Cinderella" I accompanied them. Kitting had gone away to Hampshire with Janet and her sister for a fortnight. I will never forget that evening. I saw the first meeting that took place between Helen and Giles, after they had been separated for three months. My heart stood still. As Giles said "Good-evening," he paled to a greenish tinge and looked as though he might faint. As for Helen, her eyes dilated, and a blush spread from her bosom and neck to her forehead. She placed a fluttering hand to her heart, as if surprised at herself, and I could see the pulse hammering at her throat. At her gesture, Giles's lips parted in a gasp of sheer ecstasy. "Will you dance this with me?" he murmured. She nodded, and, as he swept her

off into the middle of the room I heard him falter: "How beautiful you look, Helen, and what a lovely dress . . ." As they danced past later I caught: "But your name is wonderful, Helen. You are almost as divine to-night as the original Helen. . . ." And again, later: "I wanted to write to you from school, only somehow it would have been difficult." Then, as they gyrated in front of me: "May I write to you now? May I write every day?"

"I can't write back!" laughed Helen, bright-eyed and happy. "I never can write letters. I'm such a bad speller!" They danced out of earshot.

I thought: Can it be that these two are honestly, sweetly, truly, in love? Can it be that the miracle has happened to them? That here is a genuine exchange of hearts, without complication or exaggeration or destructive analysis? The skeptic in me whispered: It will come, it will come, all the destructive analysis and questioning and mutual criticism, together with every accusation of obtuseness and inconsiderateness. I prayed to myself: Please, God, let my Helen escape. I prayed, knowing that Helen, of all people, could never escape—Helen, the entirely vulnerable. I felt I could foretell what would happen, all the while cursing myself for being a pessimist. How could Helen escape, she who must always tell untruths, exaggerate, misrepresent? She whose indolence was a household word?

As soon as Giles would begin to discover her fault, Helen would start being hurt. She would be hurt as only the justly accused, wholly generous, can be hurt. Whereas Giles would merely undergo the lesser torment of the righteous accuser, the pain and shock of the cheated. The justly accused would stand helplessly in the dock, inexcusable, miserably awaiting her sentence, or receiving her punishment. The accuser, active and able to express himself, would at least be able to flare up and relieve himself of his unhappiness in words. His own conscience would befriend him. Of that one could be sure. And so, because of this, I did not pity Giles, beforehand, for his disappointment in Helen as a character. . . .

Had I known, there was no need to pity Giles in any case.

I wished my love could cover Helen like a cloak, enfold her and warm her and keep her safe. Only I, of my whole family, knew and understood, and passionately loved, Helen, because of a certain great warmth and utter goodness and generosity in her. Of course, the others loved her, but their passions were elsewhere. James was fond of her, but he was closer to Kitting; he was gay Kitting's "Daddie-boy"; and Oliver, in his taking-for-granted way, loved his eldest sister, but he consciously adored the playfellow of his earliest recollections. Christopher, I think, was one of the few people who respected

Helen's inarticulate goodness. And Janet understood Helen through her intelligence. But with all of them, Kitting came first, and none of them cared enough to ache over Helen as I did. At times I felt that her personality was too familiar to them; that they took her laziness and dramatizations for granted, thereby destroying any desire in her to work upon her character. This I felt more keenly when I noticed her reaction to Giles's admiration. Giles knew nothing of her reputation, one way or another; he came to her unprejudiced. I hoped fervently that his infatuation might ring some changes in her; that he would never "find her out"; that in playing up to his ideal of her, she would slowly alter herself for the better.

That unforgettable evening! My lovely Helen, in her filmy, peach-coloured dress, with its close-fitting bodice and full, billowing skirt; Helen, with her dimpled shoulders and long, round throat rising from a nest of peach tulle, her warm brown face with its rusty cheeks—a face no longer bored and resentful; deep blue eyes, no longer brooding; carrying her polished mahogany-brown head high with happiness and excitement. She looked like an intelligent, animated doll, and on all sides I heard remarks about her beauty. Helen was the "belle of the ball." And I was so very proud of her. And she was so very happy. Oliver, too, was proud of her, and was nice enough to tell her so. His admission touched

her deeply. On the way home, in the taxi, he said: "Giles has got it badly, Hel."

"What do you mean?"

"He-he," giggled Oliver. "He's fallen in love. Love, my dear, love!"

"Oh, has he?" replied Helen, with a transparently false indifference.

"Oo-er, hasn't he? And what about you?" ragged her brother. "I say, Hel, ask me to the wedding, won't you?"

"What *are* you talking about?"

"Luv, my dear, luv! Giles and luv!"

"Well?"

"Sorry! Thought you'd fallen, too. My mistake."

"Oh, don't be so silly," snapped Helen. "You really are the limit!"

"What have I said?"

"Oh, nothing, only you're so silly!"

"He-he-he."

The next morning at breakfast, Helen was down earlier than I expected her. "Well," said I. "Your first dance was an unqualified success, darling. Aren't you happy? I was so proud of my big girl."

Helen poured herself some coffee and did not answer. I asked her to tell me whether anything had happened to upset her.

"I wish they wouldn't rag me," she said. "It spoils things."

"I wish they wouldn't, too," I echoed. "But you

mustn't mind Oliver. He's only a baby, really. He doesn't understand."

"Even a baby can drag beautiful things on the floor and spoil them. I hate to have anything that's *mine* fingered by other people, even by a baby."

"Helen, I wish you'd tell me about it all," I said. "I'd love to hear."

"About what?"

"Are you in love with Giles?"

"How do I know? I've never been in love, so I can't know if this is love, can I? I do know I've never felt like this before, never."

The telephone bell rang. There was a telephone extension in the dining room. Helen picked up the receiver and said: "Hullo." Suddenly her face became ashen and she began to tremble. "Oh, hullo!" she said lightly, a quivering smile on her lips, "Good-morning! You've just rung up to say good-morning? That's nice of you. Well, well."

There was the burr of a voice at the other end of the wire and then Helen rang off. Weakly she subsided in a chair and finished her breakfast. "Mummie," she said: "Giles wants to know whether he can come to tea to-day." I said: "Of course he can come."

I watched Helen and loved her for being so young, so *ingénue,* so simple in her first infatuation; for being without tricks, without worldly wisdom. So she doubted that she was in love! How did she

in that case, imagine that being in love would affect her? She evidently asked a great deal of herself emotionally.

Giles came to tea very often during that vacation. He and Helen went for walks together (hitherto Helen had walked very little), put on the gramophone and danced together. He talked a great deal and gave her books to read; that is to say, quoted a great deal from books she had not read, and seemed astonished if she was unfamiliar with them. This astonishment wounded her vanity, and so, after a while, she would pretend to have read them. Subsequently, she would read them for fear of being caught out.

I said to her one day: "Why aren't you sure you're in love with Giles?" And she pondered; then replied: "Because I don't think he's perfect. But perhaps I *am* in love with him."

"But, Helen, you don't have to think a boy perfect to love him!"

"Perhaps not, but it hurts awfully when you *know* they're not."

The child! The *ingénue* again! The desire to love only perfection! Another time, with my instinct about Giles, I said: "Helen, I want to ask you not to kiss Giles."

"Good heavens, of course not!" she cried.

I was puzzled. "Why the 'Good heavens' and the 'of course'?" I asked. She frowned, "I couldn't kiss

anyone unless I *knew*—for certain, I mean. Could you?"

"No. One can't at your age. Aren't you certain?"

"I can't be."

"Why not?"

"I say to myself: Could I live all my life with Giles beside me? Do I admire him as I admire Daddie or Christopher? Is he kind? And I have to say No to myself." She began to cry softly. "It's awful like this. When he's away, I miss him and I want him there. . . . I hate him to be away. It'll be dreadful when term begins. But, oh, what's going to happen, Mummie? The future, I mean?"

"My darling, let the future look after itself. It'll work out all right."

I repeated my expression of the wish that they should not embrace. I told my daughter quite bluntly my reasons for this request. I told her it was for Giles's sake that she must not kiss him. It would start with a kiss on the cheek, and then a light meeting of the lips, and then a harder kiss of the mouth, with (feeling I knew Giles fairly well by now) a slight forgetfulness of the romantic element in their love; and then she would rouse Giles's passion to a much more physical plane, give his imagination a much more substantial diet to feed upon, a diet that would torment him in the nights. As they now stood, there was nothing for Giles to fight against but a picture; there were no intimate memories of any physical contact whatever.

I did not tell Helen that I understood the cause for her fears. I did not tell her that the attraction between her and the young but obviously sensually inclined Giles was sex attraction; that what distressed her was the incompatibility of the love ideal and that same attraction. I did not enlighten her, because at this romantic stage in her development it would have shocked her to think of sex in these bald terms. The child was not yet sixteen, and in many ways was veritably a child. It would have been useless to explain that sex without the love ideal was something one need not be ashamed of, but could, and had to, accept. She was at a vulnerable, romantic age, where romance was the ideal, and to destroy this ideal would have caused her the bitterest disillusionment.

They made a charming couple. Unlike most postwar young people, there was an attractive formality between them. All the good-natured "silly ass" and "old thing" and "don't be an idiot" and "you nitwit," were ruled out instinctively. Furthermore, Giles detested slang, and Helen herself was not given to using it overmuch. In our family, the use of slang was Kitting's prerogative. Also (so I was made to understand) they were very diffident with one another, almost shy. Although Helen discussed with me whether or not she loved Giles, between the two the actual word "love" was never spoken except in the discussion of it as an abstract subject. Their greeting and parting was a handclasp.

What worried me about Helen was a certain element of fear in her attitude toward Giles; among other things, there was fear of his criticism or displeasure. There was insufficient "take me or leave me" about her. She was everlastingly afraid of being found out. Also, she feared his intolerance, an intolerance which was merely that of excessive youth. She was awed by his self-assurance and ease of manner. She was afraid of his precociously ironic humour, and his ability to use words—and use them not always too kindly. By no means did she permanently agree with him, and often actively disliked his ideas, speech and actions, but was cowardly about voicing her opinions, for fear of losing favour with him.

She grew restless and fretful when he was not about to key her up. I was grateful when term began and she went back to school. They corresponded through Oliver. On paper they were happier. She showed me their letters. Giles wrote wonderfully—pages that were poetic and descriptive and full of refined, romantic innuendo. Helen replied naïvely, straightforwardly, and her letters were sincere, but, as letters go, unimaginative and poor. Later, when Janet returned from Hampshire, it was Janet who dictated them, and they became excellent—a match for Giles's own. The boy must have been bewildered by the sudden change in Helen's style of writing, and in the apparent state of her emotions, Janet let

herself go over Helen's letters as she never would have done over her own, displaying a coquetry and playfulness that were, in fact, as inexpressive of their alleged author as possible. We were all in the secret of these letters. They were, more or less, public property. That is, James, Janet, and I, knew of them and shared Helen's confidence. Janet's interest in the Helen-Giles correspondence, and her gusto for capping all Giles's lovely phrases, amused James vastly. For the time being, Helen was sublimely happy again, perfectly content to take the kudos for Janet's talent. Then a growing sense of shame and inferiority began to gnaw at her, and she returned to her former restlessness and brooding, with occasional fits of showing off, as if to prove to herself and others that she was not altogether a dunce. Janet was sorry for her. She said to James: "It isn't my fault that Helen resents my help. I wish she wouldn't admire letter writing so much. Then she wouldn't mind so much not being able to write good letters—and she wouldn't resent having to get me to do them. . . ."

James liked Janet's attitude. He saw her almost daily now; he was touched by her admiration for him, by her hero worship. He did not admit it, but he began to need her; her vitality stimulated him; her fearlessness puzzled and intrigued him. He was no mystery to her, and when she did not understand him she probed and inspected without self-

consciousness until she solved her problem. She was glamorous and really did not know it, and he liked that, too. She argued with him heartily as no member of his family had ever thought of arguing. Her respect for him was quite enormous, but her awe of him was absolutely nil. He gave no inkling of his need of her; but it was not hard for me to guess it. If a man of his temperament and years could be satisfied to spend two hours and more in the company of a child not yet fifteen, and talk incessantly to her, some sort of gap must obviously be left by her absence. . . .

A girl of fourteen and James, the utterly reserved James, James restored to the land of the living from his retirement to the Thebaïd of his soul by a bright girl of fourteen! When the situation first dawned upon me in its fullest meaning, I was a little dazed, then very humiliated. Then I reasoned it out, reasoned and reasoned until I was almost at peace again. There was less cause for anyone to be hurt in the relationship that existed between James and Janet than in that between Christopher and me. It must have been a great novelty for James to find himself admired by a creature for whom he had no ready-made reputation and no history. When Janet, as Kitting's friend, first met James, she did not know the state of his health. She did not know that he had shut himself away. She did not know that no member of his family ever bothered him with

trivialities, or approached him with commonplace problems. She did not know that he simply was not a necessary person in his home, in the way that I, for instance, was a necessary person. She did not know that no one was strictly necessary to him. She took for granted that he was Kitting's Daddie, and therefore as normal and as necessary a part of the household as the average Daddie is. She took for granted that everyone badgered him with commonplace problems; took for granted that if, for instance, there was plumbing to be done, I would remark about it to him; that if Oliver had consistent headaches, I would discuss taking Oliver to the oculist; that if Kitting learned to serve overhand at tennis, she would run to him at once and tell him so; that if, upon their return from school, both Helen and Kitting did not find me at home, they would bounce into their Daddie's study and kiss him good-evening. She thought one could ask him to untie the knots on parcels, useful man! She thought it was lovely for Kitting to have a father who could help her with her English composition. And so, blithely and eagerly, and quite unconscious of the "do not disturb" halo around James, she brought him her unfinished "The Grove" and asked for his help regarding it. She wrote him a letter: could she see him and ask his advice about something? He was the only man of letters with whom she was acquainted; all her friends were too young

and not intellectual. She begged him not to think her presumptuous, and to grant her this favour. James was flattered. The flattery was there; quite unconscious and wholly sincere, but, nevertheless, there. She saw him and discussed her problems with him: literary problems; "The Grove," in fact. She also asked him frankly what she ought to read; she felt her reading to be undisciplined. He gave her his advice, and she took it. She loved the books he suggested, and was ardently grateful, with a violent gratitude such as only she seemed capable of feeling. She read everything he had written and seemingly loved his works. He criticized her poetry harshly, deliberately, making no allowances for her age. She accepted his criticism with a deep appreciation, thinking only how wonderful it was to be taken sufficiently seriously by a man of James's position to receive a criticism at all. He was faintly embarrassed by her adoration; said he had neither the time nor inclination to cultivate a "fan"; he wasn't a movie star. She took no notice of his embarrassment; kept on going to him for advice, asking him such pertinent, intelligent questions that he had to listen and answer. Sometimes her questions were difficult. Sometimes she asked him things he had often asked himself. And it was the asking of those questions he had asked himself that really attracted her to him; it was made patent to him that, in spite of the difference in their years, there were certain

problems common to both of them, that in some hidden way they were alike, and both had the same interests. She understood James's *Weltschmerz* quite remarkably; he sympathized with her ambitions.

I could say nothing, I could think nothing coherently. Could it be that I was jealous? No, no, I cried, my dull, aching hurt was not jealousy, could not be jealousy. That was too simple. There was bitterness in my feeling, but only for a short while; not bitterness at James or Janet, but bitterness at life itself. I wanted to cry aloud: "James, I would have given you much if you had let me! Why did you marry me to destroy me? If it was romance and beauty you wanted, and the glamour of unfamiliarity, why did you strip me of this glamour? I could have been to you what I have been to Christopher—in addition to what I have been to you! I, too, was eager and impetuous once, but I bore your children and tended you, and I respected you too much, much too much. I did not storm the citadel as Janet is storming it; I had a deference for you that spoilt everything for me."

My heart was heavy within me, and I felt a fool. I felt that women like myself were cheated; by our very qualities we became uninteresting to our menfolk. We were between the Scylla of being bad wives and mothers, and the Charybdis of being dull drabs. Then, as I quietened, I reflected that Janet herself would probably one day be a wife and suffer

as I did. But a skeptical voice within me said that Janet was made of the same stuff as James, and that all that might happen to her in marriage was a partner whom she would reduce to the position of a typical "husband," when, as I, he might have had the potentialities of a charming lover. . . . I caught myself being malicious about this dear child of fourteen, a child who, moreover, had a great affection for me, and I shuddered with disgust at myself.

It was Janet's own attitude that calmed me. There was no hint of romanticism in her conduct toward James. She did not idealize him at all. She wove no dreams about him. In her eyes he was a pedagogue for whom she felt a glowing, entirely mental, passion. Her perspicacity dumbfounded me. Although she said nothing, I felt her sympathy lay with me. Only once did she say anything. One Sunday evening, a year later, it being Cora's evening out, I was preparing Sunday supper in the kitchen. Suddenly, impulsively, Janet put both arms around my neck and kissed me. "Aunt Elsa, darling, do you know . . . I know X" (her name for James) "has only loved one woman in his whole life—you."

"Yes, Janet?"

"Yes. I know all about it, Aunt Elsa. I think I must be great fun for him, like a favourite book or something. But there's only one *woman*——"

"Janet," I said severely, "you're altogether too clever. I simply can't bear it."

Her arms tightened about my neck. "Oh, no, I'm not clever," she said, a lump obviously rising in her throat. "It's not cleverness at all." Her eyes were wet, but she did not cry. She crossed over to the kitchen table and said: "Oh, shall I cut up the boiled carrots for Russian salad? You like them cut rather fine, don't you?"

Christopher and Kitting were happy, especially Kitting. It did me good to watch Kitting's infinite capacity for being happy, for seizing and holding anything joyous that came her way. She could be made happy by the sight of a butterfly, by the sound of a Beethoven sonata, by the solution of a mathematical problem, by the sight of a comic butcher's boy, his hair sticking up like spikes. Her enthusiasm rose like a skyrocket at the success of any of her little scientific experiments; blew into sparks and showered to earth again at a sudden failure; skyrocketed again at repeated success. She could laugh loudly, almost boisterously: Ha-ha-ha, her mouth open; laugh heartily from her diaphragm, until the tears rose to her eyes, as Helen could not laugh. Oliver could laugh on occasion, but Christopher could laugh from a greater depth—a resounding open laugh that matched Kitting's. Kitting's laugh was physical and effortless, and so was Christopher's. She never giggled, very seldom chuckled: where other people chuckled, she laughed. Helen chuckled; Oliver

chuckled a lot; Janet chuckled excitedly when she was amused, expelling her breath at the end and drawing it in sharply in a little squeal; she hardly ever laughed outright. James never laughed or chuckled; he only smiled. It was Kitting's greatest ambition to make James laugh.

The contrast between my two daughters began to trouble me. I bethought myself of Christopher's: "Kitting needs no one," and felt sorry for the fact, feeling that, by virtue of this self-sufficiency, she would pass by one of the most valuable experiences life had to offer; the experience of receiving and rejoicing over what she received. I thought of Helen and her needs and hungers, and how, owing to her very nature, she was being cheated and starved. Oh, happy Oliver, I thought, destined to contentment of the soul. All through his childhood, he had Kitting, and at school he was immensely popular and had many friends. He was welcome everywhere, and was adaptable to every kind of surrounding. . . .

There came a letter from Giles to Helen one day. Her eyes were still and deep and resentful when she showed it to me.

"Our housemaster's daughter arrived yesterday from school," ran part of it. *"She is leaving again in a day or two to pursue her studies in Paris. She is an intelligent and rather attractive girl of seven-*

teen without the gaucherie *peculiar to her age. That is a relief, indeed. To-day is Sunday, and we had tea at the housemaster's. Pauline, the daughter, was there. . . . I am oddly lonely nowadays, and wish I could see you. If I could see you I would not be lonely. I like to say things to you, and I say them to the Helen of the peach-coloured dress at that dance at Easter. I was lonely this afternoon. There was nothing to do, so I stroked the cat and played ping-pong with Pauline. I wish I could write poetry, Helen. I would write it to you because your beauty lends itself to poetry. Of all the girls I have ever met in this hoydenish epoch in which we live, you are the only one. As it is, all I can do is to draw your profile from memory. My blotter is adorned with a multitude of profiles of you. . . . I have been reading* Manon Lescaut. *It has touched me. It is so sad because D'Egrieux cannot help himself. People are not attracted to those who will benefit them or ultimately make them happy, and the whole book is an illustration of the tragedy of this point."*

"What's the matter, Helen?" I asked. "That's a very nice letter."

"Oh, I dunno. I daresay I'm depressed. The *feel* of the letter's wrong to me, somehow."

Janet read it and diagnosed it a moment later when she happened to be alone with me. "Giles is in love with love, not with Helen, as he likes to

think. She's just a pretext, a peg to hang his emotions on. Ping-pong-Pauline would do that just as well if there were no Helen, and Helen's intelligent enough to realize this."

I felt an irrepressible impatience rising within me. How these young people split hairs and looked for trouble! "Rubbish," I said. "They neither of them know what it is all about!" Why could they not let things be? There was Helen making herself miserable about nothing, and Giles—was Giles making himself miserable, I asked myself, doubtfully, or only rather interesting? What was it, this chase after pain, this yearning for torment, this shunning of contentment and gaiety, that certain natures pursued in the name of romance? Out of justice, I was forced to admit that Helen did not want unhappiness, only Giles.

"What," I asked her, "do you find to worry about in that letter?"

"I don't know," she replied dully, and I was again moved to pity over her helplessness. Helen was so shut in and inarticulate. With difficulty she brought out: "What's all that about *Manon Lescaut* and not loving the people who are good for you? I know what he's driving at! I know! He means there are lots of girls who are nicer to him and better to him than I am, but that I'm prettier, and he can draw me, and he likes to think of me in my peach-coloured dress. . . ."

"You're more glamorous," I helped her.

"That's no good!" she cried. "I don't want any friends who feel sorry for themselves for liking me! I want people to be glad they like me because I'm worth liking!" And she burst into a flood of angry tears. I tried to soothe her, but there was very little I could say that would truly reëstablish her self-esteem. I tried belittling Giles, but she would have none of that. I left her to Janet, who succeeded where I failed: namely in showing up Giles in a sorry light as a changeable, conceited, somewhat dishonest young *poseur*. This made Helen feel that she had wasted her attentions, made her feel she was slightly ridiculous in having thought so much of someone whom people considered a silly stripling: there was now a new reason for her mortification.

I sighed wearily, and, for the time being, gave it up.

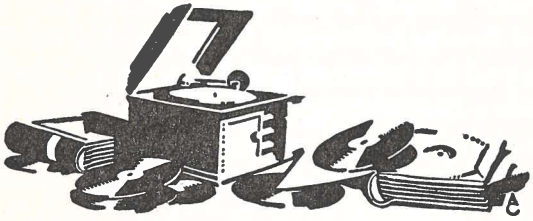
That summer we took a vicarage with a tennis court and a large garden, just outside London. We had enough spare rooms to have our friends down for week-ends, Janet and Christopher and, for one week, Giles.

Helen came to me with a request: could the peach-coloured dress be altered and simplified so that it could be worn at home, in the evenings, for dinner? It was a pity to let it go to waste, and she

went to so few dances and parties, and next year it would be old. I said Yes. Sleeves were inserted, two frills removed, and a fichu collar added. It became an afternoon dress. The Friday on which Giles arrived at the vicarage for his visit, Helen donned the newly transformed peach georgette. As she heard him arrive, she ran down the stairs into the hall to meet him. She had put a tea rose behind one ear, and she was flushed. He entered, holding a suitcase, Oliver just behind him, Janet and Kitting just behind Oliver. The two girls wore white sailor blouses and white skirts and were bare-legged. Janet had rolled the sleeves of her blouse above her elbows; her skin was tanned, and there was something warm and fresh about her young arms; her face, too, was brown, with a few dark brown freckles on her nose and around her mouth, and the whites of her eyes, and her teeth matched her dress; her dark hair, growing in waves off her high round forehead, fell carelessly in curls about her ears; her gray eyes were like pale steel to-day, owing to her suntanned face. She was chuckling, and Kitting was laughing, each of them swinging a tennis racket. Oliver had Giles's racket, and laughed, too. Giles turned to look at Janet. "How nice you look, Janet," he said. "So nice and cool." Then he saw Helen on the stairs. Playful greetings were exchanged, questions asked and answered. None of us had seen Giles for nearly four months. We trooped

upstairs and followed him to his room, remaining with him while he unpacked. It was a warm sunny day; he said he would change into white flannels at once. I put my arm around Kitting's shoulders while we chatted. She smelt nice of freshly ironed linen. Janet must smell the same. Helen stood by the window, wrongly dressed, too much dressed, for an afternoon in a country garden. I knew why she had put on the peach georgette, but Giles did not know, and he did not even recognize the dance dress he had admired and written to her about.

Presently we all went down for tea.



CHAPTER VIII

THERE are several books that were left unpacked which I intend to take with me on my travels. One of them is the *Oxford Book of English Verse.* It was Helen's, a gift from Janet M——. How strange that she should have neglected to take it, together with her other books, to her new house in Wilton Crescent! Why did she not take this particular book? How odd! There are dried, pressed flowers between its leaves; each dried flower is wrapped in a piece of paper bearing an inscription in Helen's handwriting, and a date. As I picked up the book, a wrapped-up rose falls out—from between the pages of Keats' "Ode on Melancholy" . . . the inscription is "Silo, August 1923." Silo, August 1923? Ah, yes, the very summer we were all together and during which Giles came for one week. The summer Christopher and Janet spent with us. Other pressed flowers are a pansy, with the inscription: *"Corpse Mountain,* 1927." A fragment of heather: "Publication of 'The Grove,' 1928." Four violets: "Last poem." I rack my memory. I think this was a tea rose, this one marked "Silo"

. . . Of course, the tea rose worn with the converted peach georgette dress, poor Helen. This book of poetry is saturated with memories, with sentiment, and the longing for something gone. No, no, my Helen, that will never do. At your age one looks ahead, not backwards; one has no past—only a future. Is that why you left the book behind? Why you did not take it with you to your new home—to your future with Jack? A gesture of beginning anew? One ought not to be conscious of renewal at your age, Helen. . . . I feel I know so little about you, my girl, in spite of all our talks, your outbursts, and the reading of Giles's letters. Is there any significance in the fact that the tea rose fell from between the pages of the "Ode on Melancholy"? Let me remember—let me think back. I cannot recall that Keats meant more to you than the other poets. I know so little. The summer of 1923.—Let me think back.

That summer I was terribly happy. I, *mater familias,* had them all there together, there with me, and I was conscious of their contentment: James, sitting out in the garden in the mornings, working and happy in his work; Christopher, Kitting, Janet, and Oliver, playing tennis most of the day; Giles, sitting under the apple trees in the orchard reading to Helen or off with her on a walk. Giles was working for an examination that vacation and had to do

a certain amount of reading. Helen would sit with him for hours, reading novels while he studied.

In the evenings the group would sit in wicker chairs on the gravel path outside the drawing room, on the edge of the lawn, while I would play for them on the vicarage piano, with the long French windows open. I often played until half-past ten or eleven o'clock, after the younger children, Janet, Kitting, and Oliver, had gone up to bed. Janet would invariably sneak down again in her nightgown and huddle in a corner of the drawing room near me—tense and taut with ecstasy. I remember a clear moon in a starry, cloudless sky, drenching the warm garden in its light, and the peace of that time. I would play in the semi-darkness, the only light being that of the moon. I played Beethoven sonatas, snatches of arrangements of Wagner, Bach chorales, César Franck, Gluck—all I could play from memory. I confess I played directly at Christopher and Janet: the others enjoyed music in a different way from those two. Christopher's and Janet's intense excitement stimulated me: the others merely appreciated. Music could not tear their hearts out as it could tear out the hearts of these two young friends. Sometimes, after the music, we would walk once around the garden before turning in. The dew would be heavy on the grass, the flowers would have closed faces, except a patch of evening primroses that stood up brightly on the other side of the tennis

lawn. James would not come with us. I used to take Christopher's arm; Helen would take Giles's, and they would endeavour to lose us by lingering behind.

One night I played later than usual. There was a full moon and the patch of jasmine on the wall outside the drawing room gave out a marvellously sweet scent. I played a lot of Schumann that night. Janet squatted blissfully in a shadowed part of the room in her nightdress and dressing gown. It was the kind of night in which one whispers, in which it seems sacrilegious to talk normally, in usual loud tones. At a quarter-past eleven I arose and joined James, Christopher, Helen, and Giles on the path. No one spoke. I had ordered Janet to bed. We did not walk around the garden; we sat in our chairs and gazed at the stars and at the moon, and fancied we saw the mountains and the dried river beds on the dead planet. The Milky Way hung over us like a thick, shroudy veil, alarmingly near. The stillness was tremendous, like a chorale by Bach. It was almost half-past eleven when we could bring ourselves to move. And then Giles asked to be allowed to stay out alone for a bit; he said he was not sleepy and wanted to wander around the garden.

When I was up in my bedroom I opened the casement wide and took several deep breaths. The air was saturated with the perfume of the jasmine bush. Suddenly my attention was attracted by voices,

voices in the garden. Good Lord, Janet in her dressing gown, and Giles! They were below me, but just around the corner so that my window was out of sight. I had only seen them because I had leaned out.

"Hullo," said Giles, and whistled. "You here?"

"Yes," answered Janet, and shivered. Her voice was a trifle husky with pent-up excitement. "It's too perfect a night. I couldn't possibly sleep a wink. Something comes up and gets me by the throat and shakes me. I'd like to——" she broke off and began to laugh softly. "Like to? I'm going to!" and in a moment she had flung herself face downwards on the dewy grass.

I wanted to call to her to come in, but some curious respect for her mood prevented me.

"I say, Janet, you're perfectly crazy!" Giles whispered. "You'll get soaked."

"What do I care?" gurgled Janet under her breath. Presently she arose and began to dance, barefooted, on the lawn in the moonlight. Giles stood and watched her. So did I. It was rather lovely to see. When she stopped, out of breath, she was laughing. Then she sobered. "Giles," she cried, "do you believe in ghosts?" "I don't know. Why?" he asked. "I wish I could see ghosts—a ghost," she said. "There's only one ghost I want to see." "Whose?" "My mother's. I'd like to see my mother again. I'd like my mother to come back just to-night.

I'd take her hand and we'd wander round the garden. Mother, mother!" she called softly. Giles said nothing. "Ugh!" she exclaimed sharply. "Now I've gone and done it! Now I've gone and frightened myself horribly. Oh, Giles, I'm going in. Oh, dear, how I'll hate to walk up those stairs alone in the dark with the moon making shadows. What an idiot I am!" Giles smiled. "I'll see you to your door," he offered. "Come on." By the jasmine bush she stopped, plucked a flower, and presented it to him. "A present," she said, "for so gallantly escorting me." "Thank you," he replied gravely, and stuck it in his buttonhole. "Dear me," she said. "I'm not frightened any more. Must I go in?" "I think you ought to," he answered, smiling. "It's awfully late, and you'll catch cold." "Oh, no," she contradicted, with her usual firmness. "I won't catch cold. I like this. I feel wicked about it, but it kind of feels wicked and that's lovely. Do you ever like feeling wicked?" "I don't remember ever feeling really wicked. I daresay I'd rather like it." "God, what a night!" she murmured, flinging out her arms. "I wish I were music—not a musician, you understand, but music itself, so that I could float away and touch everything. I always feel that sound, like air, can fit into the smallest and tightest corners. I'd like to enter the petals of flowers and rise to the tops of the trees. What nonsense I'm talking!" Suddenly she added, very calmly and quietly: "I'd like to die."

"Rot," said Giles. "No," she replied, "not rot. It's the truth, on my word of honour. I would like to cease upon the midnight with no pain! You know your Keats?" He nodded. She continued: "No, the other poem is better:

"Ay, in the very Temple of Delight
Veiled Melancholy has her sovran shrine. . . .

and before that:

"She dwells with Beauty, Beauty that must die."

"I say, Janet——" began Giles, then stopped. "What is it, Giles?" "It's funny, your being out here. I didn't want to go to bed, either." "Oo," exclaimed Janet, pressing her now clasped hands hard against her bosom. "It's so lovely, it hurts. Don't mind me. It's the music and the moon. The combination is too much for me. I'm just a little mad, that's all. Don't mind me." "There's nothing to mind," said Giles. "I feel the same way." "Hooray, fellow soul!" Janet emitted a sound of joy, her customary gurgle ending in a squeak. It infected Giles, and he laughed. "I say, we *are* looney!" he remarked. "Yes," she returned, "and I'm glad. Alive, that's what we are. Alive, alive, alive! Oo, tell me, do you love words? Just words? Listen: Willow, Willow, Willow. Wind. Sycamore. Water. No," she broke off, "it doesn't work. They've got to come in sentences. Tell me, what moves you more, things or

people?" Giles reflected, then said slowly: "People, I think. And you?" "Things," she replied. "Things, I'm afraid. It frightens me. I'm terrified. Will it always be things? Nothing in the world makes me squirm like music. And this"—she indicated the scene around them—"and colours and verses. Anything you can't touch and quite explain." "You can't always explain people," said Giles. She looked at him intently. "Oh, yes, you can, nearly always," she replied with the faintest trace of mockery. "Anyway, more than you can music and colour and trees and flowers and the ways of the stars, and the sun."

"You're lucky," Giles returned coldly. As quick as thought came her sharp reply. "Am I? Unfortunately I don't think so. Any more than I'm lucky because things come first with me instead of people." "Did no person ever come first with you?" asked Giles. She considered the question for a moment. "Yes," she answered doubtfully, "my mother did actually come before everything, but I lost her before I realized it. She died two and a half years ago, and I never grasped how much I loved her until it was too late. The older I grow, the more I appreciate what she was. That's why I get so wild when Helen and Kitting take *their* mother for granted. It's such a shame, because she's such a marvellous person—a lovely, marvellous person. When she gets upstairs and there are any haloes being handed around, she'll surely get one. They

don't seem to understand that, just as I didn't get there with my mother; but if she died they would. They'd know then. Why don't they seem able to know now?" "We never appreciate what we've got," sighed Giles. "Always chasing after something else. I know *I* do." "I don't," said Janet bluntly. "I chase all right, but I always chase the same things—things, you see, not people!" She shivered again, and Giles repeated that she ought to go to bed. She nodded this time, but said: "I'm not a bit nervous now; you needn't escort me. Thank you for your company. Good-night." He protested, but she reassured him that she was no longer afraid, and turned to the French windows. In another moment she was gone, and Giles was left standing in the path staring after her. Mechanically he fingered the jasmine flower in his buttonhole.

I caught myself with a start. I came to, as it were, with Janet's departure. I had watched the entire scene, rooted to the spot, unable to move. I felt exactly as if I had watched a performance in a theatre, deeply interested, apprehensive only as to its artistic development, impersonal; and yet, to be frank, I had merely been eavesdropping in the vulgarest fashion. It had not felt like eavesdropping. I did not feel I hated myself; on the other hand, I felt I had learned something important: Janet, quite unconsciously, was a devil, a witch, a

vamp, a *belle dame sans merci.* Giles was no longer infatuated with Helen. I feared that Helen was on the eve of having her heart broken. And there was nothing to be done about it.

Helen and Giles had nicknames for one another. He called her "Lella," a name of his very own. Her name for him was "Silo." I never knew its origin. After that Giles and Janet were a trifle self-conscious with one another. Giles and Helen began to wrangle in a polite, chilly kind of way. Each was looking for causes to be hurt. They began to tell one another what they chose to call "the truth." The truths they discovered in one another had in my humble opinion always existed, but for some reason, they suddenly chose to pick them out and bring them into the daylight.

On the occasions that these truth-telling competitions took place, they called one another stiffly "Giles" and "Helen." Otherwise the mere onlooker might not have guessed that anything was amiss. Giles would find out that Helen had not told him the truth about some trifle. She would retort that he was difficult to tell the truth to; that he was harsh and could not stand the truth without taking offense.

"I wish," he said once, "that you could manage not to embroider or embellish plain facts."

"I wish," she replied, "that you wouldn't be so exquisitely cutting when one told you things. Then

one would be able to tell you the plain facts you ask for without having to soften them."

"I thank you for your consideration," came Giles's answer, "but I think I can put up with the hard facts."

"But I don't think I can manage to put up with your putting-up! Your putting-up is slapping the truth teller hard in the face!"

"How is that?"

"Well, you do. You make sarcastic remarks."

"Do I? I think you are very sensitive, Helen."

"Indeed! And what do you think you are?"

"I'm not talking about myself——"

"For a change!" she returned, with fierce glee at having managed to get back at him.

Giles shrugged his shoulders. "I beg your pardon. I didn't mean to bore you," he said. "I wasn't aware that your conversations always concerned me."

"No? Well, they do."

He frowned. "Why didn't you say so before? You've been living lies all the time. If I bored you, you should have mentioned it."

"You didn't bore me, and I wasn't living a lie. It was just *you,* and I'm content to have you as you are for a friend. It's a pity you can't feel the same about me."

"I'm not picking faults, Helen. Only you *are* sensitive——"

"Well, what of it?"

"Well, sensitiveness to oneself is only touchiness——"

Helen bit her lip with anger. "You," she muttered, "of all people to talk about touchiness . . ."

At this stage, Janet blew in. "I say, Helen," she exclaimed breezily, "I wish you'd play tennis. *Do* play me a singles, won't you? I want to shake my breakfast down."

"So sorry, Janet," Helen said, her face still pale with suppressed annoyance. "I want to finish a book. You'd better ask Giles. He's always so good at everything." She could not, on the spot, find a suitable, wounding remark to make. Giles smiled and shrugged his shoulders, then turned to Janet.

"Must I?" he questioned, smiling.

"It's good for you."

"You're a dictator, Janet."

"That's equally good for you!"

He laughed. "I think you're an egotist," he said: "you only think of your breakfast—and not of the Greek translation that I ought to be doing."

"Oh rats, your translation can wait."

"You *are* an egotist!"

Janet gurgled and squeaked. "That, from you, is amusing! Oh, come off it, Giles, and take some exercise!"

"Selfish little beast!"

"Oo-er, am I? Oh, well, you'll have to take me as I am! Sorry! Meet you on the tennis court——"

"I do take you as you are. Why can't you take

me as *I* am—physically lazy and mentally active?"

"Because I don't want to! Come on!" She chuckled and was off. With a sigh, Giles rose, excused himself, and went upstairs to put on his tennis shoes.

One day it rained. Janet, as was her wont, became ecstatic over summer rain. In the afternoon, she donned a becoming scarlet tam-o'-shanter, a checked black and white mackintosh, and sauntered into the drawing room, where the family and other guests had congregated. Christopher and Kitting were playing solitaire. Helen, seated on the sofa, was reading a magazine, with Giles at her side engrossed in a biography of Napoleon. "Hullo," she said, "who's coming for a walk in the rain? I adore walking in the rain. Kitting?"

"I went for a walk this morning," said Kitting, frowning over her patience. Janet stood behind Christopher's chair. "That four on the five," she commented.

"Shut up, this is my patience," returned Christopher, and irritably slapped a four of spades on a five of diamonds.

"King up, you've got a space," continued Janet, imperturbably.

"Will you stop it!" exclaimed Christopher. "Get yourself a pack of cards, or else leave me alone."

"I adore patience," sighed Janet. "I'll play when I come back. There isn't a spare pack. Helen, why

don't you come with me? A walk after all that lunch will do you good."

"I don't like walking in the rain," Helen replied. "I hate getting wet."

Janet tried Giles.

"I want to finish this," he demurred; "besides, I'm amazingly sleepy. When I've finished this chapter, I'm going to sleep."

"Shame on you," retorted Janet. "Of course you're sleepy. It's your liver. A sluggish liver makes one sleepy. In time it gets pale and doesn't act properly, and your digestion becomes slow. The symptoms of a bad liver are chronic sleepiness, the result of auto-intoxication——"

"Crikey, listen to the girl!" moaned Christopher, slamming down his cards in quick succession. "Where did you get all that? From a liver-pill advertisement?"

"Not at all. Out of the *Encyclopædia Britannica.* I was once ill for three weeks and read volume 'Italy to Lord' slap through like a novel, meeting Liver on the way."

"I don't believe you."

"It's quite true. I tell you I'm quite an authority on Henri de Lavedan, Liza Lehmann, the Popes John, the Latin races and Logic——"

Over on the sofa Helen gave a gurgle of laughter. Giles asked lazily, "What is it?" then added, "Oh, out of a magazine story," with infinite con-

tempt. Helen gave him a glance that told of offense taken, and about to be nursed into a long, dark, creeping quarrel. Giles rose and yawned politely with his mouth shut so that tears came into his eyes.

"For heaven's sake, don't go and sleep now!" cried Janet. "You'll wake up with the beastliest headache. That always happens if you sleep after luncheon—and a nasty taste in your mouth——"

"Spare us the details, please," Kitting interrupted, tilting back her chair, for her patience had failed to come out. "I'm sick of this auction for a walk. If no one else bids I'll go myself, though wet weather always gets into that rotten knee of mine."

"Oh, very well," said Giles, rising and stretching, "I'll go. I never knew such a bully as that girl Janet. She's out to reform me or something."

"Good Lord, no!" cried Janet, and laughed a funny little mocking laugh. "Why should I want to? I just want someone to walk with."

"Stung!" answered Giles, and smirked self-consciously.

"So long, everybody!" Janet turned to go. "I'll meet you on the porch," she called to Giles over her shoulder, and stalked out.

After Giles had also left, Christopher pushed back his chair and snorted, "Those two!"

"Giles hasn't any manners," stated Kitting.

"Why, Kitting," I said, "I don't see that. I think his manners are quite nice."

"Cripes, yes!" exclaimed Christopher, with considerable ferocity. "He'd never do or say anything ill-mannered, but he has the most provoking air of superiority I've ever known in any boy. Just watch him when he gets back. He's quite an adept at subtle rudeness. As for Janet——"

"What about Janet?" snapped Kitting, suddenly glaring at Christopher. "She's got plenty of gumption and spirit. I don't think she need come in for any criticism because she wanted somebody—just anybody—to go for a walk with her——"

"Shut up! Oh, shut up!" Helen all at once threw down her magazine and leapt from the sofa. "No one can have a friend in this house without their being criticized and picked to pieces. By the time Daddie has finished *smiling* about them, and Mummie's *understood* them, and Kitting's been *clever* about them, and Christopher's torn them to bits, you feel you don't ever want them near the house."

"Good heavens," cried her sister, "I was defending Janet!"

"Yes, Janet, Janet! She's your friend. But what about Giles? He's my friend——"

"Is he?" from Kitting in an iron-cold voice, her eyes sharp.

"What the dickens do you mean?" Helen was in a rage.

"Be quiet, Kitting!" I admonished.

"He's not your friend," Kitting continued, in a

cool little voice, not heeding me. "He's nobody's friend but his own."

"Shut up!" shouted Helen.

"Be quiet at once, Kitting!" I commanded severely.

Helen, bursting into tears, ran from the room. I scolded Kitting.

"Mummie," Kitting complained, "he *is* so selfish!"

Christopher rose, and crossing to me, picked up my hand and kissed it. He was smiling. He drew me over to the sofa and we both sat down; he held both my hands. "Elsa," he said quietly, "do you remember our expression, 'roots'?"

Did I remember!

"Well," he went on, "that boy Giles has no roots. He has no—to be biblical—no bowels. Everything in him in *Ersatz*—substitute. You're wrong. He has *no* passion, only romanticism. He has no creative ability, only book-learning. Good God, everything in him comes from the outside in, instead of the other way about. If he lived on a desert island, uninhabited by mammals, where he'd be ignorant of sex-relationship, he'd have no sex!"

"Christopher!"

"Oh, never mind the brat!" He indicated Kitting. "She's going to be a famous scientist one day, aren't you, pumpkin-face?"

"If you let me," answered Kitting soberly.

"What d'you mean—if I let you?"

Kitting's face creased into a grin, and she laughed. "Darling Christopher, you are so severe with me in the lab, I'll never dare to do much with you about."

"Great Scott!" Christopher's jaw fell in unhappy astonishment. "If I thought that, I'd never go near you. You may be my pumpkin-face, but when you've developed you'll be ahead of me."

"Oh, Christopher!" She blushed and sprang up, clasping her hands, beginning to dance about. Christopher laughed, too, and impulsively seizing Kitting, gave her a hug and a resounding kiss.

"Oh, you'll be Madame Curie the second," he teased, while she went on laughing, "and I'll be an also ran."

"And Helen will be a writer."

I sighed, wondering.

"And Oliver a soldier or an engineer," continued Kitting merrily. "And Janet, well—there's no doubt about Janet."

"Janet," said Christopher, "will fizzle out, I expect, into a vamp—a *femme fatale*—one of those boring, im-fatal women."

"What on earth will Giles be, a gentleman of leisure?"

"Let me see. He's too lazy to do more than pass his exams."

"That's a slander. He's awfully talented and brainy."

"And like the majority of talented people, he makes no effort to excel at anything. No, that's unfair! He is brainy, only he's a prig. Oh, he's all right, only I don't like him."

"I know!" exclaimed Kitting. "He'll become an actor. The sort of actor that acts for sheer love of the theatre. You know, the sort of actor who always talks about 'the theatre,' not the stage. 'the Theatre of To-day' and 'the Theatre of To-morrow,' 'the Theatre through the Ages'——"

"No. An actor works too hard, and it's a heart-breaking job. He'll be a producer or whatever it's called. The bloke who walks about the auditorium and tells the actors on the stage what to do and how to do it, and how lousy they are. He'll be beautifully, subtly rude to them all the time, and immensely, unapproachably superior. And he'll approve of nobody and nothing to show how high his standards of acting are. It's a grand job, you know, being one of those chaps, because if you're cracked looney, you can always profess to belong to 'the Theatre of the Future.'"

"Oo, yes!" gurgled Kitting. "And he'll look the part so well, with his sombre, melancholy, handsome face."

"Children!" I expostulated.

"No, honestly," Kitting admitted, "we're rather pigs. He's quite harmless really. As a matter of fact, I rather liked him to start with, only he never

had any use for me; never seemed to want to talk to me, and that, after a time, is boring and not very flattering. He's so reserved, I'm beginning to wonder whether he's got anything to reserve."

At tea we all met again. James came in. Janet and Giles had returned from their walk. Janet had changed into a strawberry-red high-necked jersey. Helen, pale and silent, and much more fragile in appearance than she had been for months, sat near me while I poured the tea. She had donned a most becoming scarlet velveteen jacket, and black velveteen skirt, and I could not help realizing how beautiful she looked. Giles gave her a long, brooding stare, then turned away uncomfortably. It seemed to hurt him to look at her.

"Ouch!" said Christopher. "You two girls certainly clash. What a combination of colours!"

No comment greeted Christopher's remark.

Kitting said: "Pass the jam, Janet," Janet helped herself first and then passed the jam. Christopher looked at Janet's hand and said: "For a young lady of fatal charms, your hands are a disgrace. Look at those nails, bitten to the quick! Disgusting! Aren't you ashamed of yourself?" Janet dropped the dish, smiled dryly, and sat on her hands self-consciously. I said: "Let me see," and pulled them from under her. Not only were the nails freshly bitten, but there were two long, deep scratches across the knuckles of her left hand. "How on earth did

you get your hands into such a state?" I asked. She replied: "We pushed through a briar hedge on our way home. It was a short cut." And as she spoke she looked at Giles.

Giles had not uttered a word since he had come in, nor had he paid the slightest attention to anyone. Now, as Semiramis rubbed against his leg, he stooped to stroke her and gave her a piece of butter he had picked off his bread. I asked him whether he had enjoyed his walk. He looked at the middle of my forehead and said in a voice that carried the faintest trace of boredom: "Yes, it was very nice," and at once returned to the cat.

"More tea, Giles?" asked James.

"Oh?" He looked up for a moment. "Oh, yes, please," he replied, still very faintly bored, not looking at James. "Puss, puss, nice pussy."

"Where did you go?" asked Oliver of Janet.

Janet turned to Giles. "Giles, where *did* we go? I haven't any bump of locality."

"Nice pussy. Eat it up! Where did we go? I dunno either." He handed James his teacup without a word.

"Thank you," said James gravely. Kitting chuckled a little. James took a cigarette from his case and looked for matches. A box of matches stood in front of Giles's plate. Somewhat angrily Kitting stretched across the table and gave James the box. "There you are, Daddie-boy."

Giles started. "Oh, I'm so sorry," he apologized vaguely. "I didn't see you wanted them."

"Evidently," remarked Helen dryly. Giles looked at her coolly, through lowered eyelids, his chin tilted upwards. "Well, and . . . ?" he queried.

"You don't see much," muttered Helen.

He raised his eyebrows.

"My dear Helen, what *is* the matter?"

"Here's your tea," said Oliver. Giles took the cup and nearly dropped it. "Ouch!" he cried in agony. "It's as hot as blazes!"

Kitting, her mouth full of cake, almost exploded with laughter. "Poor dear," soothed Janet wickedly, "did he burn himselfie?" Giles set his mouth and looked at her in mock reproach, then shook his head. "I suspect," he said, "that you are laughing at me."

When we rose from tea, he crossed straight over to Janet and asked her whether she would give him an opinion on his Greek translation. Janet said she would be most pleased to do so and felt flattered at being asked. They were leaving the room when Kitting piped: "I thought you were going to play patience, Janet!"

"Oh, yes!" Janet swerved round on her heel. "Oh, I must play patience, Giles. I'm sorry. I'll read your translation after dinner."

Giles stiffened, hurt. "Don't you think you could play patience to-night?"

Janet paused, thinking deeply and gnawing a nail. "That's true." She looked up brightly. "All right! I'll play to-night and read now."

Before supper, she visited me in my bedroom, where I had gone to tidy my hair. She was excited in a hard, controlled kind of way and smoothed her curls nervously. The scratches on her knuckles caught my eye. "How did you get those?" I asked. She stood stock-still for an instant, then said slowly: "I'll tell you. Giles kissed my hand this afternoon after I'd quoted a piece from 'The Grove' to him —he was so moved by it. And to punish him, I took a piece of briar and drew these two long scratches."

"To punish him?"

"Yes, don't you understand? I said: 'You mustn't do that. Where you've kissed me I'll hurt myself. Everyone will ask me about it, and you'll be embarrassed and wished you hadn't.' "

I said angrily: "Giles is no good."

"Oh, yes, he is, really he is—underneath. He's very deep and has a great love of beauty—*such* a love of beauty: he is moved by it. I *know* Giles— I wish I didn't," she added with a sigh. I looked at her in surprise. Her eyes were filled with tears: she was suddenly sad, not violent, but mellow and strangely sweet. "It's I who am bad, truly bad. I'm not a little girl, I'm, oh, so old! Giles is a boy, little, little important boy, and Helen is a dear little girl. Aunt Elsa, let me go home to-morrow." She put her

head on my bosom and hugged me hard. "I love you, you the best of them all. I love X. I love him with a huge, warm, safe love, and I know what's going to happen. Let me go before it's too late, please. I just go about hurting—everybody—and it mustn't go on."

I waited for her to continue. I knew she would. She did. "Giles will know—he knows now—that I understand. I *know* him. I'm like a boy friend, and he'll love me for it, and all the time he'll love Helen. And Helen will be hurt because it's rotten to be loved like that with someone else getting a large slice of attention and respect which you ought to be getting."

"I know," I said.

"There you are! Let me go away!"

"Darling, I can't keep you here if you don't want to stay!"

"Oh, but I'm a rotten weakling! Make me go!"

"Darling, I can't turn you out."

She began to laugh. I patted her hand and told her to be good and things would work out and take care of themselves.

Presently I went to Helen's room to see how she was feeling. I found her standing before her mirror humming to herself, happily, placing a rose behind her ear.

"Helen, how much do you care for Giles?"

She answered me in the mirror. "I've just come

to the conclusion—a lot. A lot to be able to go on —being friends with him through all our quarrels." I was silent and she chuckled.

"In love, darling?"

For an instant she was solemn. Then, in a low voice: "Yes," she said.

I said: "I thought you and Giles had had a tiff."

"We had. And then I went out for a breath of air, out on the path, and he was there. He didn't say anything, just looked sorry and kissed my hand. I said: 'You like Janet best,' and he said: 'No, I don't. She's interesting, but she's not you, Helen.' And then he went over all our old times, our first dance together and our walks and talks and letters——" Here she broke off and blushed as she remembered who had composed the letters Giles had received from her, but then she laughed and went on: "And we realized there was so much to hold us together; and Janet, he said, took no real interest in his work. It seemed such a *pity* to quarrel. Oh, Mummie!" she cried, and flung her arms around my neck. "Mummie, Mummie, Mummie!"

"Well, my lamb, don't lose your heart too much," I admonished and came to the instant conclusion that there was no danger in the games these children played, this make-believe of love and courtship and interest in one another. They would continue to squabble and be reconciled for a very long time without seriously injuring themselves.

I left her and went down to the drawing room. There I found James staring out at the rain-soaked grass. The light was fading now, and he was silhouetted against the window. A few large drops still clung to the pane.

"Hullo," I said.

"Ah, my dear!" He turned to me. "This is a sympathetic time of day. It expresses one's mood." Again there was a little ironic twist to his smile. "Janet and Giles are becoming great friends," he ventured. "They find a great deal to talk about these days."

I sought his eyes in the gloom, and as once before I found nothing.

"The autumn is coming," he said, and smiled. I held out my hand. He took and patted it.

"What do you think of Giles?" I asked.

"He is young," and, after a long pause: "and Janet is young. And for me——" he indicated a few leaves that had fallen on the path outside. "They have so much to say to one another, those young people."

And, because of Janet, I felt very sorry for my husband.

CHAPTER IX

I LAY awake the other night, sick, my heart twisting within me with homesickness, with wild regret for times past, with apprehension for the future, with an awful feeling that the climax in my life had been reached, that my story had been told. It seemed to me that God was a listener, One who listened to the tale told Him by each human being; there is a book, a story in each one of us. I had told mine. God had listened—and now He was bored: the rest of my tale had no interest for Him—or for myself. I broke into a cold sweat. Cowardice assailed me, awful fear that the little drama played to God was at an end, the curtain had descended on the last act. To the audience the play was at an end, but the characters lived on, dully, with nothing in particular happening to them, a humdrum existence from day to day. In my entourage each had found his helpmate; grown-up sons and daughters needed no guide of a previous generation; my motherhood was over; my wifehood—and where were my friends, my own contemporaries? I have had few friends. Bella Sanding married young and lives in

America. I do not belong to any clubs; moreover, I was never one to pretend happily, to substitute party-acquaintances for friends. "Over, all over," sang my brain cruelly. "You should be dead. They would be sorry if you were dead, and would weep bitterly, but your death would not change the courses of their lives one jot. Gentle people do not alter people's lives." And yet I was needed once, truly, vitally needed. Ruthless life, ruthless death! Make way for the young. Away with the middle-aged. Away with the old. Away with the obsolete. Young people can be obsolete, too. Countless young women I know are obsolete, out of period, behind the times. Poor things. Young men, too, strong, gentle, useful young men; lusty, physically strong, happy young men without money-making ability or creative force. Obsolete, they are, useless. What a shame to think of kind, strong men as useless, but they are. There are no fields to plough, no horses to shoe. Factories make motor cars and supply spare parts, and, besides, anyone, everyone seems able to handle a motor car these days. What's the use of being able to hammer and saw and plane and drive a nail in straight? Why know how? Oliver can do these things, but he has made his way by his ability to judge a salable manuscript and to write gracefully. Gracefully, not profoundly and thoughtfully like his father. Once upon a time middle-aged women had their uses too. They were grandmothers.

Now grandmothers are obsolete. There are crèches for the poor and qualified nurses for the rich, and 'isms in infant rearing that brook no old-fashioned grandmotherly care. . . . What is to become of us all? Of us vast army of obsoletes? It is all right for the unthinking, for the light-hearted and the gay purblind, but what of us who fret over our uselessness, our past utility? Where is it going to end, this survival of the money maker or of the creator? For creation is still respected. Christopher and Kitting have their uses, and Janet, but others, less ruthless and less powerful——? This was a mood, said I, a cowardly mood, and would pass. It did.

The cream-painted wardrobe had to be emptied before it was sent to the auction room. And it was full of odds and ends of wearing apparel that could scarcely be dignified by the name of clothes. There are some moth-eaten old bathing dresses, and Helen's and Oliver's cheap old riding breeches, a clumsy riding crop of Helen's that she carefully left behind, as it wasn't smart enough. Kitting, who was not supposed to ride owing to her bad knee, constantly borrowed Oliver's breeches and disobeyed my orders, riding a certain fat pony oftener than anyone else. Kitting was afraid of riding and therefore rode; she felt insecure stretched across the fat pony, especially as he had the habit of suddenly lowering his head in the middle of a canter. Helen was afraid, and quietly admitted her fear of the tem-

peramental creature. Oliver, fearlessly enough, was the only one of the children who did not fret it and brought it back to the stable without getting it into a sweat. Janet, like Kitting, was afraid. Unlike Kitting, she did not try to overcome her fear; unlike Helen, she did not admit it. Like Kitting, she was ashamed of her cowardice, but by a series of pretexts contrived to remain firmly on the ground. Giles smiled. At home he had a horse of his own: he disdained the pony. . . . Dear Kitting, the pluck of Kitting. Kitting, bad knee and all, playing the hardest game of tennis of all. Kitting, bad knee and all, taking the longest walks (Janet only walked in fits and starts). Kitting, swimming every morning that the sun shone, in the river two miles from the vicarage; and lastly, Kitting riding that damned pony. I wish I could describe this child of mine. She is hard to describe, for there are few conflicts in Kitting, few twists and complications. Her will power is enormous. "This is bad," says Kitting, and immediately turns her back upon it. "This is good," she says, and makes a bee line for it. "This is uncomfortable," she can say, "but it is necessary"—and sets to work. I waited, and constantly wait, for her to be in a dilemma about something; a serious dilemma that will make her toss and debate. If and when it comes she will suffer untold agonies. *If*——
About riding the pony she said: "I'm rottenly afraid of falling off. But I'm far more scared of being a

coward. So I sez to myself: 'My girl, which is it going to be?' And I decide. That's all."

I laughed: "My daughter, you are in danger of being a prig."

"Hm. I? Oh, no, please. Helen's afraid, decently afraid, and she's right not to ride. Janet's afraid, too—and she's not decent about it 'cos she's ashamed. Helen's not ashamed—and that makes it all right—somehow."

James smiled at me. "My dear," he said to me, "your children are too precocious and philosophize too much. They're too brainy."

"My dear," I returned, "they are *your* children in that respect. Oh, Kitting," I sighed, "aren't you ever undecided about anything?"

"Of course, Mummie darling."

"What, for instance?"

"Over things in the lab. When Christopher tells me, very definitely, to do something a certain way and I know of a better way. Then I don't know whether to give in to him because he's older and wiser, or to stick to my way."

"What do you do in such a case?"

"I say to myself: 'My girl, make up your mind whether you'd rather fight with Christopher and be called names by him—and risk being wrong—or have your way.' Usually I can decide a thing like that pretty quickly. Christopher gets his way unless I'm dead certain."

"So in the end, you decide, after all? And why in his favour?"

Kitting blushed and shrugged her shoulders. "Oh, Mummie, I wish you wouldn't ask. It's soppy of me. . . ."

"Tell me, darling, unless you'd really hate to."

"Oh, well . . . it's because, in the end, I'd rather do anything than upset him and have a fight. There's no reason why you shouldn't know."

"My dear, you spoil him!" I could not help smiling.

"Of course. I don't mind, though. I decided ages ago that it gave me far greater pleasure to spoil him than have him cross. I get awful fun spoiling him, he adores it so, and he knows it, so it doesn't matter anyway. Occasionally he gets annoyed when my giving in sort of creaks. He tells me I'm just a pandering little female, and he hates my damned superiority, as if he couldn't stand being argued with, and so on. So now we've an arrangement. When an argument comes up I say: 'Do you want your way more than I don't want it?' And we've promised to be dead honest with each other, and he's never cheated yet. '*How* much don't you want it?' I ask. And sometimes he laughs and answers: 'Oh, I daresay you want it more than I don't. Have it your way.' " That was during our second summer holiday at the vicarage.

My girls were growing up so fast! They were

developing so quickly! And they were precocious, too: it made me feel old. Helen and Giles had still hung together in their hectic friendship during the past year, not seeing a great deal of one another and not writing so many letters. They both seemed a litle calmer, and when they met they talked and danced together quite happily. I am certain they were more reserved with one another, no longer sought one another's entire confidence. Not seeing or hearing of each other for months enabled them to develop a fresh reciprocal glamour. Helen had a new and altogether charming, almost womanly, self-consciousness and grace in her demeanour, a self-confidence inspired by the fact that she went out to a certain number of parties nowadays and found she was attracting the attentions of quite a quantity of men, both young and nearing middle-age. And Giles, poor boy, had pimples that year. That was his age. Helen could afford to condescend and be kind and generous. And kind and generous she was, grateful for the opportunity of showing how nice she could be. So Giles was again asked to spend some time with us at the vicarage. Janet, too, was there. But here again was a new Janet, a somewhat restless Janet, less self-confident and a trifle moody. When I found Oliver taking an admiring interest in her, I felt this was too much, and the obviousness of the situation appalled me. Luckily, Janet was patently bored by the out-of-

door and sporting unintellectual conversation with which my son entertained her and did not encourage his interest, so in a short time, while still fond of her and as full of admiration as ever, he took her too much for granted to feel romantic about her. In fact these two later became excellent friends. "The only brother I've ever had," Janet calls him, and Kitting, "My only sister——"

"Kitting," I asked my younger daughter, "why do you always prefix your conversations with yourself with 'My girl'?"

"Well, you see, I do that to keep myself from getting conceited or thinking I'm wise or grown-up or clever or anything."

"You're sure you don't think you're rather clever at handling Christopher?"

"I don't *handle* Christopher, Mummie," she replied with the slightest trace of impatience. "I just *am*. I do what I most want to do with and about him. If I wanted to argue more than I want to give way, I should do so. I'm doing what I *want,* not being a martyr, as you seem to think. Anyway, I don't believe in martyrs, or at least I don't worship them. People are martyrs because they choose to be. How can one pity people who are doing what they want?"

"That's hard and self-righteous, Kitting!" I exclaimed. "People *do* make sacrifices for others and often it's very hard for them."

"Oh, I know, Mummie, you're quite right. I'm only really talking about myself. I mean, I don't feel I make a glorious sacrifice in spoiling Christopher. I enjoy it hugely, it's the jolliest thing in the world. Why should I pat myself on the back and think I'm a fine character 'cos I'm doing what I want and having a divine time?"

She left the room.

"Where does she get it from?" I asked of James, puzzled. "That overmature ability to know what she wants and where she's going? One of these days she'll come a fine cropper."

"No," replied James. "She's not the kind that crashes. And she gets it from you."

"From me?" I inquired, incredulous. "What do you mean?"

"I have observed," said James, not looking at me, "that you seldom flounder. You have, I am convinced, said 'No' to yourself more than once and switched your mind away from problems you considered dangerous or insoluble. You have a will of iron, my dear. Don't deceive yourself."

Remembering a certain incident in which Christopher had played an important part, I kept silent. So James had seen, had known! I felt a stab of pain at the thought of what his knowledge must have meant to him, sensitive as he was. He continued: "A character like yours inspires one with tremendous confidence. One knows where one is. There are

certain situations in life, one realizes, that are inconceivable to you. And in that respect Kitting resembles you. She, too, can say 'Yes' and 'No' and mean them. Neither of you toss for long, restlessly, between your desires and your consciences. Consequently you are safe people and trustworthy. You are free, can be allowed to be free. In both of you the strongest sense wins, be it your sense of decency or your sense of need. You don't waver."

I held my breath. Not for years had my husband said so much. "And you?" I asked, "aren't you like that at all?" And I thought of Janet.

He shook his head and smiled. "I am a poor fish," he said.

"You are reserved," I said. "You hide things."

"Yes," he acquiesced. "Only reserved, that is all."

"The inner fight goes on," I probed, "only you don't show it. You are unable to put things out of your mind. They remain and torment you, only no one knows about them. Is that it?"

"You are too wise!" exclaimed James with a short laugh. He reached for a book and opened it. It was a sign that the conversation was at an end.

"James!" I exclaimed, but he did not heed me. I repeated his name. He looked up and this time did not smile.

"Darling, I want to read," he said firmly. "I'm so sorry. I must finish this to-day. It's in reference to my own work. You'll forgive me, I know."

I left the room. No sooner had I left the room than I wanted to return to it, to reopen my conversation with James. What right, reflected I, somewhat angrily, had he to determine when our conversations were at an end? After all, I was his wife, and he had no business to shut me up like that. What was this air of autocracy he gave himself, this exercising of a mild terrorism over the entire household? As a gentle rider rules a spirited horse, so James ruled his family. With softly spoken, ironical, incisive words and quiet, deliberate gestures, he forced those around him to obey his behests. That is to say, as far as his personal life was concerned. He could summon and dismiss at will, and no one would demur. Like a naughty child, found out, who had become troublesome after being told that Papa was, after all, omniscient, I had been informed that I might now run along and play, for Papa was busy. I hesitated outside the door, mortified, annoyed, hurt. Then I could but shrug my shoulders. It was too late to rebel now, and his power was of his own achievement and subtle enough to evoke respect. It was purely the result of a secret, armed personality that relied for its effect on his strangely forbidding silence and withdrawal from life. Ah, well, I decided, it was all my own fault, caused by my over-respect of his moods in the past. I accepted the position, and my brain dictated an impersonal, detached attitude towards James's behaviour. Still a trifle dis-

turbed emotionally, my face flushed, my nerves taut, I wandered to the drawing room and mechanically opened the piano. As my fingers touched the keys, Janet entered the room on tiptoe, a book under her arm. Happily, silently, elated by the sound of music, she slid into a large armchair and nuzzled into it. I had not intended to play, only to strum in order to soothe my nerves. She disturbed me in my search for calm. I did not want her there. I did not want anyone there. I wanted to be alone. Her presence vibrated in the room and filled it like the buzz of telegraph wires; it was positively noisy.

"Janet," I began in exasperation, my hands slipping from the keyboard. She leapt up as though she had sat on a pin. God, I thought, is this immediate understanding of my mood the outcome of almost incredible sensitiveness or of vanity? Sensitiveness to my mood, or vanity, stung into existence by a realization that she wasn't wanted there? She came over to me, stood over me for a few seconds, frowning thoughtfully, gnawing her right thumb nail with ferocity. Then: "I wish you were happy," she said slowly. "Aren't men beasts—and idiots?"

"Janet, I don't want to talk."

"Sorry."

"What do you know about 'men' you silly little girl?"

"Oh, I don't know, lots. I just do, that's all. And

they're blind as bats and as selfish as beasts, and as unsubtle as—I don't know what."

"How do you know all that?"

"They make me sick." She went on with sudden passion. "It's so easy to take them in. They're like badly brought up brats, they only like the obvious, only recognize the obvious. They get taken in by charm and obvious clothes and poses and high spirits. They're too dull to appreciate unselfishness, intelligence, grit, courage, character, real beauty and tenderness. 'Sex appeal' to them, damn 'em!"

I knew she was talking about James. Instinctively I knew it. About James and his attitude towards me and about herself. She made my heart sink to my boots. For a moment I felt as if my heart had physically, in a literal sense, cracked and scattered itself through my bowels, to my heels. She could see too much; no; no one could see into my heart, into the life James and I were living out together; she must have a sixth sense. For a moment I thought my brain would explode, a fire seemed to have lighted in my head. Then, again, I began to think. Her strange contempt for James affected me in an odd manner. I was half angry, and yet I wanted to laugh at her flattery because her contempt for him was on my account. And that contempt only existed because of his interest in her, because of his consideration for her. Did she really think so little of herself that she lost respect for

him because he didn't? It was all so ludicrous, so involved—and yet so fantastically childish! These were the messy problems of a seventeen-year-old girl, the "love" problems of a romantic flapper! All this business was of no real importance. At the point at which James and I had arrived whether he neglected me, failed to appreciate me, or thought too highly of Janet, ceased to have any profound significance. We would always exist side by side, James and I, exist in comparative comfort; we did not quarrel or bicker, and in his speech he was as full of deference for me as he had always been. What on earth did I expect of marriage? Good heavens, I had already managed to get a great deal out of it! If I had indeed had the prolonged love affair most couples crave, I should probably have had little or no peace. Love affairs are tempestuous things. A love affair would undoubtedly have resolved itself into one of those nagging, fault-finding partnerships, one of those overintimate relationships that end in husbands and wives reading each other's letters and generally knowing each other's business so well that any kind of pride or privacy becomes impossible—— Here my conscience forbade me to hoodwink myself any further. I would gladly, said my conscience, have had a violently intimate marriage, such a marriage as James and mine had promised to be but for the war and the war's effect upon James. My loneliness clutched at me with

hungry fingers now, now that I was sufficiently honest with myself to admit of its existence. Oh, dear God, why had I been forced to miss so much? I would gladly have paid any price—but this negative lockout business—this vacant day-to-day littleness —this *insult* of not being interesting enough to tell things to, of being too *small* to obliterate the memories that still crippled him. . . .

I glanced at Janet. She was biting her nails hard and thinking her own thoughts. She had contrived to destroy my desire for solitude, but my recovery was evidently not apparent, for, seeing my look, she said: "I won't disturb you any longer," and prepared to go. She made for the door that led to James's sanctuary, and instinctively I put up my hand to stop her from intruding on him. Then, in a somewhat cynical frame of mind, I let her go, thinking that James could mind his own business and turn her out himself if he didn't want her there.

For quite two whole minutes I sat in a kind of daze, staring at a page of music propped up before me, yet seeing nothing.

Then Christopher entered the room through the French windows. "Hullo!" he called breezily. "Been playing?"

I shook my head. Then shook my shoulders to rid myself of my depression. "Where's Kitting?" I asked, just to say something.

"Kitting, my dear Mamma, is pretending to be a

horsewoman. You would laugh to see her on that fat old pony. She's as red in the face as a tomato, so frightened, and as plucky as hell, bless her. Going round and round and round the paddock with Helen standing by, admiring her, and the languorous Giles making patronizing remarks."

"Is it safe for her?"

"Oh, yes, all right. Though, of course, she's got no earthly grip with that one knee of hers. Rides entirely by balance." He chuckled.

"Christopher, she won't fall off, will she?" I rose, a trifle alarmed.

"Lord, no, and if she does, she hasn't far to go. Anything the matter, Elsa?"

"No. Only—only——"

He began to laugh softly. Christopher was attractive when he laughed like that; it was an intimate, caressing laugh that comforted one, took one into its confidence. His eyes crinkled at the corners, and he looked a boy when he laughed.

"I'd hate Kitting to fall," I said. "She's brave, and it would upset her to fall. Bravery should be rewarded, not made to look ridiculous."

"She won't *feel* ridiculous. She's all right, don't you worry."

"Christopher," I asked, "are you ever such a little bit heartless about Kitting? I mean, are you never, by any chance, tender about her? She's only a little girl, you know, a sensitive, dear, sweet little girl."

"I know all about Kitting," he replied, and his eyes mocked me a very little. "I know more about Kitting than—" here he looked me straight in the eyes—"more than you do, my dear."

"Oh, no, you don't!" I cried. "You are merely taken in by her. You treat her as if she could stand up to anything, bully the life out of her, rag her and slap her about. You are as rough with her as if she were a boy. And she's not a boy."

"Listen," he said, and he was not laughing now, "I have such a profound respect for that brat of yours that it defies description. I think she is so much my equal and even my superior that I expect everything of her I'd expect of myself—and more. You can't blame me for not being 'tender' with her. To praise her would be to indicate the faintest surprise over her merits. I'm not surprised; I take them for granted. I can't be afraid for her or fuss. It would be offensive. One can't fuss over Kitting."

"Can't one?" I exclaimed, and now I felt a trace of anger. "Why not? If she hurts herself, who will suffer, you or she?"

"She. But in the meantime I refuse to insult her with petty solicitude. She feels the same way about me. You ask her."

I felt as if a pair of wings had sprouted inside my head and were beating wildly. I could hear their whirring. "Good God! You're as hard as nails! You'll spur her on and on until she collapses! You'll

strain her to breaking point. She'll smash, for she'll never give in. For heaven's sake, Christopher——" I broke off, for I suddenly spied Helen through the window, tearing across the lawn to us. Helen, lazy Helen, running? thought I swiftly. As she came nearer I detected panic in her expression. She was pale and breathless.

"Kitting," she gasped. "Kitting has——"

"What?" I screamed.

"—fallen off that pony. Christopher," she panted, "she wants you to carry her."

"Hurt?" I contrived to ask.

"Not badly, but her knee——"

I turned to Christopher, and suddenly heard my own voice as if it were another's, with a note of horrid triumph that astonished me: "*Now* are you satisfied?"

But, ashen of face, he had already started to run in the direction of the paddock.

In the paddock the pony was galloping wildly round and round. In the far corner, by the hedge, Kitting lay curled up, holding her leg and moaning a little. Giles knelt beside her helplessly.

Christopher flung himself down on his knees on the grass. "Kitting, Kitting dear, darling, you're hurt!" he cried, "and it's my fault! Christ, what can I do?" For answer she moaned, biting her lip.

"I'll pick you up."

"Hurts," she managed to utter, then whimpered a little with pain.

"Christ Jesus!" agonized Christopher desperately.

"Get away, Christopher," I ordered, *"I'll* carry her."

"No, no; let me," he said, and began to gather her up gently. "What a fool I was. All my fault."

"No," Kitting contrived to jerk out, biting her lips harder to keep from crying.

Christopher rose with her in his arms and started to walk towards the house. "Baby, baby, forgive me."

He strode ahead of me at such a pace that I could not keep up with him. There was rage mingled with my distress and I found myself muttering aloud as I trotted behind him: "Fool, brute, idiot! I hate you for this! My baby—hurt. Confound you!"

He did not hear me then, but later I let loose upon him the full flood of my bitterness. He sat and looked at me while I spoke, like a helpless, guilty boy taking a thrashing. When I finished speaking there was a moment's silence. I looked at him to see just how much impression I had made. Suddenly his face creased and he began to weep. With another little-boy gesture he covered his eyes with his forearm, but I could see the tears running down his cheeks.

I shall never forget that. Christopher crying on

account of Kitting. I have often had that picture before me, since: Christopher's little-boy gesture of raising his right forearm to cover his eyes while he cried. Christopher crying without restraint, his face distorted with grief——

The doctor came, and we were told that Kitting had fractured her knee-cap. Christopher was with her constantly, cheerful and noisy in her presence, miserable and contrite the instant he left her side, always the sorry, penitent little boy.

He was so truly sorry that I forgave him.

One afternoon we sat on the lawn after tea. Helen, Giles, Oliver, and Janet had taken themselves down to the river for a bathe.

"Poor Kitting," said I, "laid up. She adores swimming."

"Don't rub it in!" snorted Christopher.

"Why don't you go?"

"No fun." He sucked at his pipe. "Kitting. Life and soul of the party and all that sort of thing. Couldn't stand Giles and Janet without the alleviation of Kitting's boisterous presence. Giles probably can't swim and squeals when he feels cold water."

"Oh, not squeals?"

"Groans, then. And Janet will probably dramatically get into difficulties and have to be rescued."

"You don't like Janet much, do you?"

A slow grin spread over his face. "Oh, she's not so bad," he drawled. "Lacks a sense of humour,

though. Not like Kitting. Nobody like Kitting, Elsa. Nobody in the bloody wide world like our Kitting. Lick her boots—gladly."

"Is it like that?" I smiled.

"Uh-huh." His pipe went out and he carefully relit it. "As bad as it can be. Tie myself into knots about her. Get all worked up inside. I'd like to eat her."

"Kitting is only a baby," I said. "She's not sixteen yet."

"That's true. I can't help that, can I? I'm not asking for anything. Just waiting and hoping."

I remembered Kitting's conversation of a few days before and felt that Christopher had the right to hope. I rose, and picked up my jersey coat, preparatory to going indoors. I had to see to the dinner. Automatically I repeated, "She's a child."

"I know," Christopher answered in a low voice. "I know. I'll wait."

"Well, so long!" I whispered. "So long, my Christopher." The possessive pronoun had slipped out and I felt myself colouring. He sucked fiercely at his pipe and did not look at me, for which I was grateful.

"D'you remember," he said, "that afternoon several years ago when the kids found the dead baby rabbit?"

"Roots," I replied.

"Yes, roots. You wore a black hat. You took it

off. You sat leaning against a tree. I lay on my belly on the moss and looked at you. I was all upside-down, and you set me straight. Because you were so good. I was afraid to believe in you in case you might let me down. You *are* good. Never let a chap down. An ache, Elsa. An ache forever."

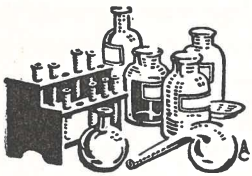
"I don't understand you, Christopher."

"Don't you? Kitting's an ache too. So like you in character if not in personality. I could weep over you as if you were music. You *are* music to me. But I could sing and whoop with joy over Kitting. God, how I'm crazy about Kitting."

I looked at him and saw his eyes were moist.

"Christopher," I said sharply, "what's the matter with you? You cry altogether too much these days."

"I know," he said softly, and knocked out his pipe. "I know."



CHAPTER X

I OFTEN like to think of James as a little boy: in fact, I have not sufficiently thought about James as a little boy. In the early days of our marriage, before his reticence, he sometimes talked about his childhood, but seldom, if ever, discussed his parents. He had no brothers, but two sisters, one of whom married a clergyman, the other of whom never married at all. The married one, although I perpetually found excuses for her, I frankly disliked; the spinster was rather fun, a jolly, plain, plump, red-faced individual with a sense of humour, who loved gardening, sketching clumps of rhododendron, and making jokes. Kitting inherited some of her freshness, her spirit, and her sense of humour.

I understand, from James, that conversation (as different from small-talk) was unknown in his home. When the family met, words were exchanged, phrases passed around as if speech were in fact a form of competition in which the one who told least came out winner. And yet James developed, and his sister Rosalie grew up to be no fool. In solitude and in the silence of unspoken thoughts, these two

brought themselves to maturity. (The sister who married the clergyman never matured; her mentality remained forever that of a monitress at a girls' public school.) That James's mind should have flourished and borne fruit as it did, condemned to this spiritual celibacy, still puzzles me. I often wonder what could have been the object of such an upbringing; it obviously involved an enormous waste of time and energy.

During the early years of our marriage, I asked James this question, and he told me that, for some reason, it had been considered a lapse of taste to discuss anything that mattered. To discuss a subject about which one felt deeply might cause an argument, and to cause an argument in which people could grow vehement was dangerous and uncomfortable. The subjects of love, art, science, religion, or education were, in consequence, taboo. Rosalie read quite a great deal but never discussed what she read, even with James. To talk about books was "highbrow"—and in the worst taste of all; it might cause the most fearful sense of inferiority in anyone who was not a reader. At most she would say, her eyes bright and twinkling: "I've just happened on such-and-such a book, James; it might intrigue you." By that James would know she recommended it. When he had read it himself, he would say: "I read the book you mentioned. Quite worth while," by which she would understand that it had met with his

approval. Had he disapproved he would have made no mention of it at all.

Poor little James! The one advantage of the kind of education he received was that of not being forced to expose his sensitive soul to the possible brutalities of an uncomprehending family. At the same time he laboured under an exaggerated sense of the difference between the printed word and human speech: for centuries poets and writers had expressed themselves freely in literature: whereas, to his ken, one guarded one's speech with tremendous care. He would often appear quite prudish in conversation, while in his work he was always most outspoken. When he spoke he had a mannerism of circumlocution that was not unattractive. For instance, in describing a certain row he had with a cab driver, he related that "I then lost my temper, I confess, and accused the wretch of illegitimacy." Another time: "Our language became singularly free, and apart from a general accusation of cretinism, I also added carmine—in blunter terms—to other unflattering adjectives——" He appeared to say to me exactly what lay on his mind, but always he chose to clothe his thoughts in garments that fitted but did not reveal their exact portent. There were those who found James pedantic. Some of his friends, to his face, criticized him for his lack of frankness, to which he replied, with a little smile: "The garden, gentlemen, not the jungle. The soul, or let us say the mind,

is a jungle; the brain, and in turn, human speech, is a gardener coaxing this jungle into forms: arbours, pergolas, and so on. Art, gentlemen, is not life. We cannot run about in a state of nature—and I maintain that conversation is, or should be, an art. I deplore what so many of my contemporaries choose to call frankness. I deplore it in the field of art, where it describes itself as naturalism; in manners, where it is the alias of discourtesy and of coarseness—and of mental indolence. There is no need to be dishonest or to give false impressions; on the other hand, nothing is gained by a naked display of hard facts, by baldness. Baldness is not beauty; and barren hills not more attractive than pine-clad mountains."

Had Oliver been of the same generation as his father, he would undoubtedly have described his own feelings in exactly the same words. Oliver was very much James's son; more hidden than the others. Being a man child, he appeared less emotional than his sisters—inevitably. In reality, the boy was immensely more *inward* than either of the girls. Helen was patently sensitive, Kitting obviously lived her life *out*. It was Oliver who, of the three, cared the most for music. Yet he would never disclose this fact, was shy of what, he felt, might be interpreted as "softness" or "sappiness." Oliver, at one time, grew exceedingly devout (he is still an oddly religious young man, "oddly" for the present day). Kitting is the unraveller; she hates all mysteries, and

despises human ignorance in any of its aspects whatsoever. Helen is frankly unconcerned, questions nothing, accepts much, but is no conscious partisan either for or against Faith as opposed to Science. Yet Oliver is silent, and only in his eyes can be seen occasionally a look of hurt at the many blasphemies he has, inevitably, to endure these days. The blasphemies, to him, are manifold. He mentions none of them. A bit of a stoic, Oliver. I exult a little over Oliver. In him, in his kind, lies the hope of a generation. He is good-natured and easy-going, a trifle overtolerant; he has a gentleness, a sense of fairness towards the opposite sex that is truly marvellous; he is independent, self-reliant, and responsible. His is a free spirit, and he has pride.

I have been accused of neglecting Oliver, of concentrating my affections upon his sisters, of giving him too little attention. I can honestly say that Oliver is my greatest, perhaps my only achievement. I love Oliver, my blessed, my dearly beloved only son. I have had much out of life, I have taken great joy in bringing up my two girls; although I hope I have never been selfish about them. But I *know* I have never considered my own pleasure over anything that concerned Oliver. There was nothing about his existence that did not involve the sacrifice of my desires, from the very first moment of his consciousness. When I look about me and consider Giles and Jack and other of his friends, I frankly

congratulate myself. For of all the young men I know, Oliver is the most unhampered, the most manly, the most male. I bore and bred my son for the great world, not for myself; I expected no comfort through personal contacts with him. My joy is only in his success as a man: the greatest of all, perhaps. Everything has turned out according to plan. I did not make a play for his love: I steeled myself into not caring whether he loved me or not: I almost hoped he would not love me overmuch. All the time my heart, my desire, rebelled against such a hard, brain-fed wish; but I had seen too much havoc wrought through the bonds that tie a son to his mother to wish such a thraldom upon my own flesh and blood. If anyone does not realize just what a stern sacrifice such a course meant to me, let him try it with his own offspring. I did *not* say: "When in doubt, come to me, your mother, darling!" He was free to come to me, but I never instructed him to do so. He was subjected to a fairly strict discipline, at an early age, that threatened to make me unpopular with him. Strange that I was not unpopular at all. With the girls there was often nonsense: half-hours later for bedtime cuddled and kissed out of me. With Oliver, there was no nonsense. I forced him to rise punctually in the mornings, he was made to eat up all the food on his plate. He simply was forbidden to whine. He was expected to look after his sisters, to take long bus

journeys alone and not get lost: in short, to be utterly self-reliant in all matters. Intelligent conversation and opinions on several kinds of subjects were expected of him. Also, it was taken for granted that he could be useful about the house. He knew he was loved, but no one clung to him avidly, no one enslaved his affections. There was none of that rapaciousness, that greedy child-lust in my attitude towards him. If he had a cold, I would pretend to wait for him to tell me about it. As he never did, I would casually remark: "You've got a cold, Oliver. Good Lord, haven't you a tongue in your head? Or are you trying to be brave?" Anything not to give him the impression that he was being fussed. It was my ambition to make a happy and successful man of him, independent and uninhibited, even at the cost of his devotion to me.

Oliver was less frequent a topic of conversation with me than either Helen or Kitting. That was largely due to the fact that he was less *original* as a personality than the other two. Helen was the greatest source of worry to me of them all—and therefore her name was most often on my lips. Kitting was a most crystalline character; the remarkable, arrow-like intensity of her nature attracted attention; but Oliver was facile, was easy to manage, his upbringing presented fewer problems than that of the others; therefore I have heard myself criticized on his account. Reproaches have been

levelled at me concerning my supposed lack of interest in him. It has been said that I love my son less than my daughters. I protest.

It was Sunday forenoon. After Oliver had, quite unsuccessfully, attempted to teach Janet how to turn a cartwheel, he mopped his brow and flung himself into a wicker armchair. It was no good: Janet had a weak back. The hot sun of early summer beat down upon us in the little back garden. Janet, but recently recovered from her Early Victorian spell, was savouring her new-found liberty from petticoats and hoops by rouging her lips and wearing a dress (with bloomers to match) that was, at best, a kind of glorified bathing suit. She seized a cushion and sat on the sooty grass, inspecting the palms of her hands that were grimy from her late activities. Oliver offered her a cigarette out of a box on the wicker table. She took one and lit it. Janet already smoked too much—more than was good for her. Oliver, of course, did not smoke at all yet. "Let's see your nails!" chaffed my son. Promptly and with almost aggressive pride, she displayed her finger-tips. He whistled. Not only had she allowed them to grow to a reasonable length, but she had gone to the trouble of having them varnished a deep pink. "How long are you going to keep that up?" he asked.

"Until the next writing mood!" she laughed back. "Every canto takes its toll of finger nails!"

"Revolting. Incidentally, when are you going to finish that thing? You've been writing it for years." He reached out and grabbed the tattered exercise book with its short, chewed pencil on a string, and began to read.

Janet rose idly from the ground, took a step over to the portable gramophone, wound it up, and put on a jazz record. She began to jig gaily, humming. Oliver, by now, was immersed in her work. A male voice sang the chorus of the dance number. The lyric was clever. Janet stopped humming and dancing and listened.

"I say, Oliver," she said, "that's awfully clever. I wish I could write as good a dance-lyric as that!"

"You could if you wanted to," replied Oliver, without taking his eyes off her manuscript. "This is damn good stuff, old girl."

"I couldn't, not if they paid me a million," Janet returned, still on the subject of the dance record. "They say that record has sold over a million. It's sad, it's 'blue,' I daresay that's why. How the public loves passion and tears! Nothing like a good cry."

The record came to an end. Janet put it on again. She took another cigarette. Then: "Where are you, which bit?"—to Oliver.

> *". . . music that would entreat*
> *All fear and ugliness forever to forsake*
> *The world . . ."*

"Jolly decent, Janet."

"Oh, yes!" Janet flew to his side and snatched the manuscript. "That's one of the better bits. Let me see!"

Oliver protested. "Hi, you beast, I was reading that!"

"You can read it later. I've just thought of something I want to jot down." In a moment she was frowning over a couplet.

Oliver looked over her shoulder. "I also like 'Winter pregnant with the Spring,' " he remarked.

"Uh-huh," emitted Janet, seemingly lost to the world, already engrossed in her work. She stumped out her cigarette and reached for another. I quickly removed the box before she could take one, saying: "No, Janet, you've smoked enough." Automatically she obeyed me, too far away to argue or even to know what was happening. Oliver and I both laughed.

"What a girl!" he exclaimed. "Her thoroughness is awful. She overdoes everything. Now she's oversmoking. And there's nothing she doesn't overdo."

"She isn't hearing a word you say," I chuckled.

"No. It'll be a bonfire when she's over twenty. If ever she goes in for heavy love affairs, there's no saying what might happen."

"Oh, shut up," said Janet, who had heard it all.

She finished writing a line, then looked up, her expression like thunder. "What tripe you talk! I didn't want to listen to you, it wasn't worth it. You forced me to notice. The gramophone's run down. Put that thing on again."

Oliver obeyed her meekly. It seemed incredible that she should write verse which attempted to be classical while that negroid syncopation tum-tummed in her ears. Presently she tossed her exercise book away and grinned. "That's over. I've got *that* off my chest, thank God. Aunt Elsa, I *like* that tune. It's grand, and the verse—its appeal is terrific—like some rather bad, successful film and a few successful novels, it strikes a responsive chord in the breasts of the daughters of Eve. At one time or other every human female alive, primitive or sophisticated, has felt like that." She began to clap her hands in the "blues" rhythm and sing:

"Dry yo' tears, sister,
Dry yo' te-a-eers—
Another sweet man
Will happen along!

Come, sis-ter, sing this song:
I got a scare
Lest sump'n' was wrong
With me!

I got a scare
My eyes, 'n' my hair

Weren't all they was s'posed to be-e-e.
I thought my heart
Was break-ing—
It was only my smart-
in' vanitee:
Another sweet man will happen along!
So sing—this—song. Sister—
an' dry yo' tears——"

Janet squealed with joy at the end of the verse and flung out her arms, exhibiting a few steps of the dance with great verve and abandonment. I laughed. Her vitality was infectious.

"Look at our 'It' girl!" said Oliver. "She's not bad at it, is she?" He laughed. "If all else fails, she can go in for revue."

By this time James had joined us from the house. She was still capering happily. He watched her for a time, then said: " 'Was this the face that launched a thousand ships?' Dear me, not so long ago this young lady was the epitome of dignity and gentility——"

Janet stopped her dance abruptly. With a glare at James she threw herself into the wicker chair, picked up her exercise book and studied it.

"Why, what on earth's the matter?" cried Oliver.

"Ask your father." She pretended to go on reading, then suddenly broke out, at James: "And I'll go on jazzing and—and polishing my finger nails as much as I like!"

We stood around her in a flabbergasted semi-circle. Had she completely gone out of her mind? Temperament was emphatically Janet's most evident attribute. Savagely, she continued.

"Yes! And I'll use lipstick and rouge if I think it'll improve me. God, this purposeless suppression of perfectly innocent instincts and impulses——!"

James smiled, his head characteristically on one side. "If you think make-up is an instinct, you are at liberty to paint yourself like a Red Indian. But what has this nice primitive exhibition of rhythm to do with lipsticks and nail polish?"

Janet did not answer him. Her smouldering eyes met his for an instant. Then, almost wearily, she shrugged her shoulders. "You can always beat me," she said, "when it comes to surface words. I'm not talking in words that disguise meaning. I'm trying to get at something. It doesn't suit your purpose to follow the workings of my mind. I don't blame you. I think you are the most remarkable man I've ever met. I think, however, that underneath all your retiring ways, your 'don't-care' airs, you are destructive. You look up to nobody in this world, revere no single soul. If ever you are in danger of admiring anyone, you quickly lay them on the dissecting table to make sure something is wrong. With infinite kindliness you go to great lengths to destroy the self-confidence of everyone around you—especially those people you are in danger of respect-

ing or liking too much. Occasionally you meet someone like Christopher, who is so dominating that he stands criticism from women only—because he feels he needn't take much notice of it, it's purely emotional criticism! But to return to you: is there a solitary member of your family whom you haven't sought to take down a peg?" Again her temper rose a little. "For over five years you have tried to make me feel small. My writing was accidental and temporary—and not very good at that. My behaviour was erratic and uncontrolled. What others called spontaneity you named lack of reserve. My way of dressing was a pose. And now, because I am dressing more fashionably, because *I am growing up,* I am dubbed undignified and cheap!" She turned to us all. "It wouldn't matter what I did, it could always be used as a slap. I see it! I see it all! I should be a doormat, just plain dull. I'd *be* dull and uninteresting—and that, that, *that* would be his greatest triumph!"

White with anger and the enormity of what she had just done, she ran into the house.

James, Oliver, and I remained standing, silent. For once, James did not smile.

I followed Janet into the drawing room. She was pacing up and down in real agony of spirit, her face distorted, her hands clenched.

"Perhaps," I ventured, "you didn't mean it all."

She stopped pacing. "The trouble is that I meant

every word of it—have meant it for years. It was one of the things I had always taken for granted and put behind me—that X was an iconoclast. There it was, and I'd accepted it. But to-day he annoyed me. It was obvious and therefore unworthy of him to object to jazz and all that goes with it. It was 'shock,' old-fashioned and dry and professorial and proper and pi—all the things a writer ought never to be."

"It is so easy to hurt," I said, "so unthinkably easy."

"Yes. All one has to do is to allow the naked emotions to run amok. Oh, God, what sublime things words are! They can clothe thought and emotion and make the crudest and cruellest things appear decent——"

I laughed. "How much a disciple of James you are! You yourself don't realize how much!"

"Oh, yes, I realize how much!" she flashed back. "I wish naked thoughts and emotions need not hurt. I wish we could all be strong enough to bear them —and that one's thoughts could be strong and beautiful and so bear the test of remaining undraped."

"I also wish," I returned, "that human bodies could afford to remain naked. I'm sure that most of human modesty is shame, self-consciousness, an innate sense of absurdity. But there it is. We wear clothes, not so much to disguise ourselves, as in

order to lessen the shock our complete nakedness would give."

"Yes, yes. I see. I could have said, in a pseudo-humorous tone of voice, 'My dear X, undoubtedly my abandonment to this primitive noise startles you. That's because you are an old fogey. Shame on you. I've stood your brilliantly subtle nagging for five years and now, at last, I see through you: you're just an iconoclast, that's all you are, and you've just hit on something new to correct me about! And I'm just not taking any notice of you this time.' And I ought to have laughed good-naturedly and all that sort of thing."

"Yes," I agreed, "why didn't you do it that way? You have said everything now you said in the garden, only less hurtfully. Janet, my darling, you are a young tigress, and your claws are sharp. You can make exactly the same gestures in a different mood, and they will have a different significance."

Janet all but stamped her foot in revolt. "Oh, the dishonesty of it all!"

I took her by the shoulders and looked into her eyes. "Do you really hate James so much—as much as your mood? Or were you merely in a rage? And the rage lent volume to your words?"

"Oh," Janet began to break, "you're right, you're right. I'm beginning to be so sorry, so, so, *so* sorry. What can I do?"

"You needn't do anything," I said, for I heard

James's footsteps ascending the stairs to the drawing room. The front door slammed. It was evidently Giles and Helen, with Kitting and Christopher, who had just returned for luncheon from a small cocktail party at Giles's house. They were laughing. James entered the room. Janet came up to him, a little pale, and took his hand. She pressed it to her cheek.

"I'm sorry my mood was so nasty when I said what I did. Aunt Elsa had been talking to me. I had every right to lose my temper, and I had a right to say what I said, but the combination of temper and speech was horrid. Forgive me. You see, you hurt me, X. For a long time you've been hurting me, picking on me in your sweet, gentle way. But it doesn't matter a tinker's cuss. I love you enormously. Fire away—I'll never let the claws out again. . . ."

"My dear child," said James seriously, "it is your honesty that——" The rest of his speech was cut off by the entrance of my two daughters and their escorts. A strange young girl was with them. They had brought her along to luncheon. James clasped Janet's hand tightly. Both, I could see, were deeply moved. Janet's eyes were moist. Janet, with tears in her eyes was very lovely.

The girl whom my children brought home to luncheon that Sunday became Oliver's first love. She was everything that my daughters were not:

cool, sophisticated, and unobtrusive. She was prettily dressed, in a nice, ladylike, unnoticeable way; her hair was dully blonde, her eyes large and hazel; her teeth, even and white, protruded ever so slightly. She moved gracefully, was as tall and willowy as a fashion plate. She was always smiling and was a darling. Oliver appeared to be fascinated by her slender prettiness. He had been brought up beside an elder sister whose beauty was somewhat voluptuous and unusually warm, and a younger sister who was attractive owing more to her spirit and intelligence than actual looks (not forgetting the overintense Janet, with her hot, fiery seductiveness). This girl was a magazine illustration, and of a kind he had never met before. She was a rest and a relief from the strongly flavoured women of his home. There was an American look about her, too. The American look of a moving-picture heroine who had not struggled or fought and who could do no wrong but had to get into trouble because of the plot. Oliver had always been somewhat of a cinema goer; and this girl was a shadow heroine come to life. He stared at her rather, through luncheon, and she smiled frankly back, full of cool, sweet, fragrant good-nature. Her perfume was "La rose Jaqueminot." She did not talk very much—to which Oliver was unaccustomed in the girls he knew—and he could talk to her and impress her.

After luncheon we all sat in the drawing room

for a time. She said: "Who plays bridge?" in a sweet treble, accompanied by the usual smile. Helen and Oliver both played bridge, but they could not find a fourth, so abandoned the idea, and some other card game was decided upon instead. Giles joined them. James retired to his study, and Christopher, Janet, Kitting, and I found the drawing room stuffy and escaped into the garden.

"I know," grumbled Christopher; "she shrieks when she's startled and giggles when she's amused, plays bridge when she has nothing to do, and her idea of celestial music is a jazz band."

"Vicious, positively vicious," chaffed Kitting. "Why shouldn't she be like that? Who's she hurting?"

Christopher mumbled something unintelligible. Janet laughed and volunteered: "I bet she's going to fall for Oliver."

Barbara ("Babs") Mortimer remained for the rest of the afternoon. Yes, that was her name. It had been Helen and Giles who had taken to her initially and asked her home to luncheon. Her father was a housemaster at a public school; her mother was an old friend of Giles's mother. She was, at the time, staying with Giles's people in London "to get some shopping done."

After tea the young people rolled back the rug in the drawing room and danced on the stained floor (and what a scratchy mess they made of it, to be

sure!). The portable gramophone was brought up out of the garden. Janet constituted herself general winder-up. Later I went over and sat down beside her. Her nose crinkled up with laughter. "Aunt Elsa," she gurgled, "I'm the outsider here! Occasionally Oliver and Giles politely ask me to dance out of a sense of duty, but I'd rather not, only I have to be tactful. What rot all this tact is! It's fun to watch them. I wonder when anything *real* is going to happen to me. I sort of envy them. You know: young love and all that kind of thing."

I could not help thinking of James, and of a certain moon-drenched night one summer when she had danced on the grass in her dressing gown to Giles. Was she merely being a hypocrite? Or had she forgotten? The vamp.

She appeared to be thinking the same thing; her expression changed from amusement to concern. "I love X," she said, slowly, "but that's different. And Giles once—flirted with me. That's not what I mean."

"It's all right, Janet," said I, patting her hand and smiling.

"Another sweet man will happen along,"

sang the chorus on the gramophone record.

"Damn that beastly yowling tune!" snapped Janet and stopped the machine. A storm of "Hi! Why did you do that?" greeted her, and Babs, in

a disappointed tone, said: "Oh, why did you stop it? It's a *heavenly* tune!" Janet said: "Sorry," shortly, and changed the disk in a hurry. The couples danced off—Janet turned to me again. "I wish we could get rid of them and you could play, darling. I've got a divine idea for a poem. It's a civilized version of that bestial 'blues.' I want to know whether I can do it——" She dashed out of the room and returned with a pencil and an old envelope. On the back of it she scribbled:

In your sad eyes there rests a cloud, my sister,
A storm-cloud spelling rain
Your flower-head, in pain,
Too humble a thing, is bowed, my sister——

Oliver and Babs came over to us. "Where the deuce is that 'Dry Yo' Tears'?" muttered Oliver, sorting the records.

"Must you?" asked Janet.

"Why? Any objection?"

"I'm sick of it, that's all," answered Janet casually, shrugging her shoulders. She crushed the envelope containing her lines in the palm of her hand, made a little ball of it and laughed.

"Why do you do that?" I cried.

"It's rotten. You see, darling, the emotion itself is a bit jazzy. Look around you. Isn't it, though? It's worldly, and so is the thought. Cynical and light. Oh, what a world." She sighed wearily. She

put her fingers in her mouth, sinking herself into a reverie, and began to peel the varnish off her nails with her teeth.

I spoke sharply: "Stop doing that. It's filthy."

She put her hands down quickly, but in a few moments she was at it again.

Babs Mortimer and Giles left just before supper. Before departing, she thanked me: "I've had a marvellous day. I do hope you forgive me for this visitation!"—and smiled. She then turned to Oliver and shook hands with him, still smiling.

"Do come again," Oliver said nonchalantly. "We'll get a fourth and have some bridge some day soon."

"That would be divine," she replied. "I'd love to."

After she and Giles had departed, the atmosphere of the house became flat and lifeless. Oliver, thrusting his hands deeply into his trouser-pockets, began to whistle "Dry Yo' Tears." I followed him back to the drawing room.

"Hullo," I said.

"H'llo," he answered idly. Then: "I think I'll take a walk before dinner. Need some fresh air."

I need not sell or store the old portable gramophone. Oliver has it. He says it will do capitally to take on the river or on picnics.

CHAPTER XI

IN A mood, Janet wrote:

The Master of the Winged horse is Need,
The Soul's in bondage to mere lips and eyes,
And Paradise is guarded by man's greed,
And learning is the limit of the wise——

James told her it was no good. It was not poetry, he said, but amateurish philosophizing in rhyme. She agreed with him and bit her thumb nail to the quick with anxiety to please, rang up Giles, went for a walk in the park with him, and returned to write, in another mood:

I walk thro' the wood,
My heart singing within me.
I am wrapped in a silken cloak;
I wear this cloak joyfully,
For when my Beloved greets me,
Running from between the trees,
I shall enfold her, and thus
Cloaked together as if we were one,
Slowly, happily,
We shall walk thro' the wood.

This, said James, simply wouldn't do. What was she trying to manufacture? A second-rate libretto?

Somewhat discouraged, but not seriously depressed, she sought me out and proceeded to talk. How Janet could talk! Kitting said of her: "Whew! When she eats, she *eats,* and when she walks she *walks*—and when she talks, she *talks*——"

I was in the pantry helping to put fresh flowers into the embossed silver vases left to James by his mother. Janet took a piece of chamois leather and began, absently but with enormous vigour, to polish a silver bowl.

"I know," she said, "what's the matter with that poem of mine. X says it's like a libretto, but *I* know. It's that it's too, let me see, too irreverent. Now I must explain what I mean by irreverent. It's modern. It's full of self-expression. Self-bunk. Art is getting altogether too full of 'That's-what-I-feel-take-it-or-leave-it.' Let's go back to the Bach and Handel 'Is-this-worthy-of-my-Lord?' attitude. We don't work enough. I don't, anyway. One must work secretly and deeply. Aim at smoothness, at polish, when one has said one's say—and then work like a slave to be comprehended. That's hard work. Reverence towards one's God is like reverence towards a beloved human being. One doesn't, if one really loves a person, say: 'That's-me-take-me-or-leave-me.' One tries to please and to be understood——"

"Do you love anybody as much as that?" I asked.

She paused in her polishing and frowned fiercely.

CHAPTER XI

IN A mood, Janet wrote:

The Master of the Winged horse is Need,
The Soul's in bondage to mere lips and eyes,
And Paradise is guarded by man's greed,
And learning is the limit of the wise——

James told her it was no good. It was not poetry, he said, but amateurish philosophizing in rhyme. She agreed with him and bit her thumb nail to the quick with anxiety to please, rang up Giles, went for a walk in the park with him, and returned to write, in another mood:

I walk thro' the wood,
My heart singing within me.
I am wrapped in a silken cloak;
I wear this cloak joyfully,
For when my Beloved greets me,
Running from between the trees,
I shall enfold her, and thus
Cloaked together as if we were one,
Slowly, happily,
We shall walk thro' the wood.

This, said James, simply wouldn't do. What was she trying to manufacture? A second-rate libretto?

Somewhat discouraged, but not seriously depressed, she sought me out and proceeded to talk. How Janet could talk! Kitting said of her: "Whew! When she eats, she *eats,* and when she walks she *walks*—and when she talks, she *talks*——"

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"Do you love anybody as much as that?" I asked.

She paused in her polishing and frowned fiercely.

"Don't frown," I said, "it isn't as knotty as all that."

She did not hear my correction and continued to frown and polish. "Well," she admitted, "I do try to please and to work on myself, to smooth myself —and I don't even love such a lot." Then, with the same intensity, she grew silent and thoughtful. If her brain could have made a noise, one could have heard it tick. Her absorption was complete. When she spoke again it was to say: "If this silverware were mine, I would love it rather a lot."

"Why?"

"Because it is obviously fraught with associations. How did you come by it? When? When was it used? It must make you think of the times you filled the vases with flowers, of every dinner party, of those who gave it to you. If it were mine I would love to handle it. As it is, it gives me a peculiar pleasure to touch it." She drew a finger caressingly across a piece of moulding. "Nice," she crooned, "smooth and worn a bit. I hate new silver. I love old things. I'm not religious in any orthodox way, but I love old churches. I can pray in old churches, only because I feel: here millions of people have knelt and worshipped. Old streets thrill me—the thought of the tread, tread, tread of millions of people. Old trees. And even old people. Yes, I like old people, now I think of it. Old workmen, old ladies. But they must be really old, you know."

"You're a strange girl."

"That's what I like about Giles. Giles has that reverence, that real love, for old things. Old things and new ideas."

" 'Old things and new ideas,' " I repeated. "That's rather nice."

She gave me a quick smile. "Yes, it is rather nice, I agree. Most people want new things all the time and are content with old ideas."

Helen entered the pantry. "Hullo," she exclaimed, and patted her hair. "What are you two jawing about?"

"Old things and new ideas," replied Janet promptly.

"Oh," said Helen vaguely. She did not quite grasp what, and she was not too interested. "Mummie," she said, "that nice friend of Oliver's, Jack K—— is getting up a party to dance at the Berkeley, four of us. May I go?"

"You may, darling."

"Oh, what fun. Oh, dash, I haven't any decent light stockings."

"I'll lend you mine," said Janet. Then: "Is Giles going?"

"Oh, no," answered Helen quickly. "Jack and Giles don't even know each other."

"Oh, yes, they do. They're both friends of Oliver's, and what's more, they all went to school together."

Helen did not reply and looked sulky, having been caught in a lie again.

"Oh, never mind about the stockings," she said, after a pause, "I'll get some somewhere. Perhaps Kitting's got some."

"What on earth's the matter now?" cried Janet, "what have I said?"

"Nothing. Only I'm sick of being made to look a liar, that's all."

"Who said you were a liar?"'

"I didn't say anyone *said* I was a liar. You're too clever to *say* anything outright. You only suggest. I'm sick of your cleverness."

"Oh, go to hell!" blazed Janet suddenly, and swung out of the pantry.

"All right!" called Helen after her, "ditto to you."

I sighed. "You exasperate me, Helen. What's the matter with you? Really, I echo Janet's sentiment. Your touchiness bores me."

"Very well," replied Helen, her bosom beginning to heave with self-pity. Then she, too, left the pantry.

Giles came to tea. Helen would not speak to Janet. Giles brought a drawing to Helen. She thanked him, and then rather loudly asked him: "Are you a great friend of Jack's?"

"No, not a friend," replied Giles.

Helen turned in triumph to Janet (who seemed to

have forgotten their little difference) and curtseyed ironically.

"All right, all right!" said Janet, shaking her head.

"What's all this about?" from Giles.

"Janet and I had an argument," explained Helen. "She said you and Jack were friends, and I said you weren't——"

"You little liar!" Janet cried, exploding like a firecracker and stamping her foot in fury.

"How dare you?" shouted Helen.

Giles began to laugh softly, but heartily. Kitting, looking up from the book she had been perusing, called out: "Go it, Janet. Fight her, Helen. Ten rounds. A thousand to the winner!"

"What on earth is it all about?" asked Giles, when he had sufficiently recovered his breath to speak. "Someone tell me."

"Helen can tell you," snapped Janet shortly. "I don't condescend to."

By this time Helen had frozen: her blue eyes blazed like pieces of ice. "Very well," she said, "I'll tell you. I told Janet I was going out to-night with Oliver and Jack and another girl. Janet asked whether you weren't going too, as you and Jack were friends. I said you weren't."

Janet gave me a helpless look and shrugged her shoulders.

"No, Helen," I interrupted impatiently, "you've

got it wrong. Do try to remember the story and get your facts straight. Janet never said Giles and Jack were friends."

"Oh, what does it matter?" sighed Janet in exasperation. "Let it be, Aunt Elsa. Helen is incorrigible."

"Go on, Lella," said Giles, with a new, hard look around his mouth.

"Well, anyway," continued Helen, "we argued about it. And Janet suggested that I was lying. And I took exception to that. She always makes me feel a liar."

"It's strange," said Giles coolly, "that Janet should be under the impression that Jack was a friend of mine. I'd never have a friend who was such a—such an oaf."

Helen stared at him. His eyes met hers stonily.

"Jack, if you please, is a friend of mine," she returned with haughtiness.

Giles bowed. "So I discover," he replied.

"I choose my own friends," she went on, "and am not going to stand interference from anybody—or be influenced by anyone whose idea of criticism is to call an absent person cheap names behind his back."

Again Giles bowed, but he had grown pale at her outburst. "Cheap names?" he queried.

"Yes. You called Jack an oaf."

"He is an oaf. That's not criticism, it's fact."

"Matter of opinion, I should think."

"Oh, no," Giles returned with the same coolness, "a fact, I assure you. An indisputable one. Jack, poor fellow, is an oaf; a yokel, a beef-eating, limited, dull-witted young man of excellent family, with kindly, good-tempered, honest instincts."

"Hi!" cried Kitting, "I'm fed up with this. Go and take your quarrels elsewhere. I don't know Jack, and I don't care a rap whether it's a vice or not to eat beef. I want to read in peace and quiet, and I can see Mummie's had enough of all this wrangling."

"So have I," added Oliver with a warmth which suggested that Giles's attack on Jack had made him a trifle angry.

Giles bowed again and politely bade us good-bye, explaining that it was time to go home to dinner. Helen silently accompanied him to the door. Janet and Oliver left the room for a game of table tennis before dinner. Janet looked worried.

"Whew," whistled Kitting, when we were alone. "Exit Prince Prig and the two fishwives. I say, Mummie, that's cheek of Giles, you know, to talk like that about Jack."

"It's honest, that's one thing."

"Anyone can be honest in that way if they don't care whom they hurt. Giles is the free-est person I've ever met, because he doesn't care a straw whom he hurts—Helen or anyone. Out with the truth and damn the consequences or anyone's feelings. And

he gets hurt himself, more easily than anyone I've ever met. Couldn't you see how upset he was to hear that Helen was going out in a party with Jack and not him?"

"Is that it? How naïve I am! It never occurred to me it was that which upset him, although I could see something had rubbed him the wrong way."

"Poor old Helen! What a liar she is, though. I say, I wish she'd fall for Jack, if only to give the order of the boot to Prince Prig. He's so vain, it would annoy him."

I shook my head. My poor little Helen was merely attempting to reassure herself, to recapture her dignity in her own eyes by a ruse that anyone less intelligent than Giles could easily detect. Giles, by virtue of his own moral principles, would never admit his loss of interest in Helen. I knew a great deal of Giles's ideas on life. He had, during the past three years, expounded many a theory in James's and my presence. He despised changeability, lack of constancy in people, professed contempt for those who fell in and out of love easily. But if Helen "hurt" him, or put herself in the wrong in his eyes, he would, I could foresee, be merciless. He did his best to conceal his admiration for Janet; refused to admit that he and she spoke the same language. Helen had, as it were, been somewhat of an inspiration to him during his schooldays. Janet did not fill this rôle, being insufficiently passive to be anyone's

model, far too preoccupied with her own activities to pose or posture for any man's delight. Janet cared too little for anyone to bother her head over what Giles thought of her. Where Helen wondered what would be Giles's opinion of her behaviour, or reaction to her opinions, Janet was more interested in contemplating her own opinions and reactions. What interested Janet was how things struck *her,* of what value they would be to *her,* of what she would derive from them. She respected James's criticism of her work because she trusted him implicitly, but in no way did James influence her behaviour. Helen would have liked to excite the unbounded admiration of Giles. I think that, although she was in constant, secret terror of his displeasure, she rather respected his austerity. I did not respect his austerity so much because, like Christopher, I suspected that he was more rigid towards others than towards himself. He was clearly not in favour of Helen's friendship with Jack (I could not help feeling that it mattered little what Helen did these days, he disapproved) ; but he himself cultivated a deep friendship with Janet. What I could not bear about him, frankly, was the way in which he was gradually divesting Helen of every shred of self-confidence. Her air of defensiveness in his presence was pathetic. As if to prove to herself that she was not in the very least impressed by him, she defied him rudely every time she opened her lips. Her subconscious fear lest

he find her just a dull, pretty girl, made her tell incredible yarns, come out with astounding pieces of news—all without foundation. On these occasions Giles would smile, disdaining even to expostulate with her. I could not understand why he still maintained his attitude of devotion. He should leave her alone, thought I; this affair had gone far enough. All he does now is to hurt her, unwillingly, perhaps, but hurt her nevertheless. And yet, as I reconsidered the question, it occurred to me that perhaps he was still in love with his past dream of her, that she was, to him, what Christopher had once said to me: "An ache, Elsa, an ache forever." And I was profoundly sorry for them both. I wondered whether Janet, glamorous, violent Janet, could ever displace the sweet, warm, peach-coloured dream that had been Helen. So long as this dream of a past Helen held sway, the torment would continue; when the dream faded, the torment would fade with it, for although he was unaware of it, the present Helen meant nothing to Giles. And Helen would realize the futility of trying to attract a blank.

There came the day when the spell broke: Giles's dream vanished, and Helen's hard-nursed house of cards came tumbling about her ears. One spring day, when the air was warm and crocuses had appeared in the park, Helen, very pleased with life (for she was wearing her best new spring tailor-

made, complete with gardenia and small sable tie) took herself off to a certain little French restaurant to lunch with Jack. It so happened that Giles, on that same day, decided to lunch at that very restaurant, at the same hour. Helen returned from her luncheon a trifle perturbed. Later in the afternoon Giles turned up. I saw him only for an instant as the parlourmaid showed him into the drawing room. He was very pale, with the pallor of angry righteousness. As I ascended the stairs to my room I met Helen.

"Darling," I implored, "don't go down, I beg of you. Giles is in a hideous temper, and you're all worked-up yourself. Let me send him home and see him to-morrow. To-morrow, both of your tempers will have blown over."

But Helen said: "What? Let him think I'm afraid of him? Not I. I'll tell him I won't have it, once and for all. All this absurd Early Victorian interference ——" and she tripped downstairs.

After a time their voices rose, Helen's first in protest, then Giles's. "I'm surprised at you!" I suddenly heard Giles shout: "One of the things I never could have guessed about you is that you are cheap! Cheap! It hurts me. I feel a damn fool."

"Not the fool I feel, you prig!"

Then their voices dropped again for a while. The next time a voice was raised it was Helen's, in an almost hysterical scream. "Stop! stop! I won't lis-

ten! You never had any feeling for me, only for yourself. Your selfishness is so terrific you can't even see it! How dare you reproach me, after the way you run after Janet?"

"That's different. Janet's a friend of yours, isn't she? I've known her for years. And I like her. I'm frank. And I'm nothing to her. But Jack is just a cheap flirtation. You say he's nothing to you, but you know he's crazy about you—and you lead him on, accept his attentions. Either you've lied to me or you're just a cheap flirt."

"I *do* like Jack! I'm happy and gay when I'm with him. I'm sick to death of being lectured and schoolmastered by you! *I like Jack!*"

"I don't know what to believe any more. You can't expect me to believe a single thing you say! Not a single thing!" He was terribly bitter.

Helen broke. "Oh, Giles, you *can't* say that! You *can't,* you *can't.*"

"I do say it. You've lied too often."

I heard no more talk just then, but I knew Helen was sobbing. I wanted to go into the room and stop this nonsense. I was seriously upset. Had I guessed at Helen's overwhelming unhappiness I would certainly have interfered. Had I known at that time what Helen was undergoing, no sense of tact could have held me back. I did not know; I had no inkling of the violence of Helen's emotions. She hid too well. I suppressed my desire for arbitrary inter-

vention, my inclination to box Giles's ears and send him home; to make Helen wash her face in cold water and tell me all about it. A mocking voice within me repeated, over and over again: "*Mamma,* dear *Mamma* again! Interfering *Mamma.* Mother came too. Always parental interference. Of course *Mother* must butt in——" I wish now I had not heeded this voice but had trusted to my motherly (if interfering) instincts.

After a time Giles emerged with Helen behind him. Singularly enough they spoke to each other quietly and there was no trace of a fight. They shook hands, and Giles called out good-night to me. Helen mounted the stairs quite coolly. Her eyes only faintly bore the traces of recent weeping; her face was greenish, but she was perfectly calm. She went to her bedroom quietly, and I followed. Kitting was there, brushing her hair before dinner. She gave her sister one look and exclaimed, aghast: "Why, Helen! You look too awful. Are you going to be sick? Can I help?"

"Oh, no," replied Helen, pressing one hand over her left breast, "oh, good Lord, no!" She had a sulky look, a familiar look that was expressive, as a rule, of minor troubles, but not of heartbreak.

"Helen," said I, and seized her shoulders, "tell me what's happened!"

She hesitated, then answered dully: "Giles and I have decided to stop being silly. He said I'd—

I'd killed any feeling he'd ever had for me through my lying and all that. And I said: 'All right.' But he said he thought we could still be friends and I said, 'Yes.' "

"Oh, Helen!" cried Kitting compassionately. "It's not all over?"

"Uh-huh," replied Helen with huge carelessness. "It is. I'm sure it's much better so. We're still friends, you know, but not romantic ones, that's all." She writhed a little and gave a shivering, involuntary little grimace. Kitting and I looked at one another, appalled. I think she could not bear our company, our scrutiny. She rose from the bed on which she had seated herself, crossed to the dressing table, deliberately took a cigarette from a crystal cigarette box, lit it, and wandered from the room. We were almost overwhelmed by her capacity to suffer and suppress. It was not bravery with Helen, it was less conscious than that. It was an instinctive refusal to acknowledge pain; a make-believe that pain was not there. Even in this she was able to lie—to herself. And yet, it was obvious to us that she was racked by her misery. Giles, from what I had overheard, had spoken to her harshly and rudely, to say the least. She had, I fear, tried to excuse herself—to plead with him. His flat refusal to listen to anything she had to say must have been a terrible shock to her; the blow to her vanity must have caused her to double up with agony. The realization that

for several years she had cared more for Giles than he for her, that he had really been waiting for an excuse, however unconsciously, to rid himself of the romantic aspect of their relationship, must have made her smart with humiliation. It was obvious, now, that though she had blinded herself, or glossed over, what she had found unlovable in him, he had not had the generosity to do the same with her. Always, ever since that first summer at the vicarage, she had been repelled by a certain cold-hearted, cold-blooded, puritanical quality in him. There had been a battle within her, between her sense of truth and her purely physical attraction to his tall, elegant, polished remoteness. Frankly, I could perfectly well understand the spell Giles was able to cast over the young women of his acquaintance. Incidentally, what is it about the chaste Adonis that sends Venus after him in such hot pursuit? What is it in young celibates that invariably excites the desires of the fair sex? Let a man be truly cold, priestly, puritanical, and women will quite shamelessly throw themselves at his head. There was this quality of austerity in Giles—and it was just this quality that had kept Helen in thrall to him. I could suffer with her in her chagrin over her loss, after the way in which she had for so long sacrificed her self-esteem. It was awful to find out that one had been suffered——

There followed a bitter month or so for Helen.

During this time she saw a great deal of Jack K——. Jack was a kind youth, with much more generous and good-hearted impulses than Helen's former swain. He made good-natured jokes, laughed a great deal, read but little, knew nothing about music or art. ("I know what I like, that's all," he would say. At which Christopher would snort that even a moron knew that much, for if you stepped on his toe he would undoubtedly recognize the sensation it gave as unpleasant.) Jack liked theatres, "movies," and outdoor games, and he liked dancing quite a lot—and driving fast cars. In fact he raced cars himself, at Brooklands. He was frank and cheerful and he was not *gauche*. What I found rather charming was a certain yearning tenderness he had for Helen. In him Helen found all that Giles lacked. A certain quick, warm sympathy and tolerance that she needed. And she cultivated Jack—and forgot she had ever written verse. Some weeks later she had her hair cut and set into neat waves, discarded her picture dresses in favour of smart, somewhat sporting clothes, and took to smoking through a holder. For the first time one could see in her a physical likeness to Kitting, although in her sophisticated elegance there was nothing to remind one of Kitting's boyish attire. Almost pointedly, Giles still called on us, sat politely with us at tea, making polite conversation. At Easter he went north to join his people. From his home he wrote to Helen:

a courteous detached letter, beginning *"Dear Helen"* (instead of *"Lella dearest"*) and ending, noncommittally *"Yours—Giles."* *"The air here is balmy,"* he wrote, *"and it would do you a world of good to breathe it. My dear Helen, we must really go on being friends: I despise those who can turn round and deny people things that were once dear to them. In such people lies a base ingratitude not to be tolerated. One should always thank, in one's heart for any happiness one has received—even though it be in the past, even though grief follows it. Therefore I thank you, Helen, for a long period of happiness, of beauty and romance that, come what may, cannot be eradicated. I shall never forget that happiness, Helen——"*

Helen stood by the window, holding the letter and staring out. It was about two months after her quarrel with Giles. I could see her distress: her under lip protruded, and she was frowning to keep the tears back. She handed me the letter, insisting that I read it. I sighed. Giles, excellent as his intentions appeared, had no thought to spare her. It was almost as if, by mentioning their past relationship, he had deliberately set himself to reopen old wounds, to keep alive a poor half-withered flower that was better dead. Or again, perhaps, he enjoyed basking in the warmth of another's love, although any feeling for her, in himself, was dead. And suddenly I hated him profoundly. I hated him as Christopher

had always done—"the conceited, self-admiring pup," as Christopher called him, "the unimpassioned, cold-blooded bastard," thus Christopher hotly, after hearing from Kitting of the break between him and Helen. "If there's anything I cordially dislike in a human being it's gutless, bloodless intellect and heartlessness. I'd rather have a passionate murderer around than one of those smug, walking, human-shaped balloons. Ugh!"

At about the same time, Giles wrote to Janet, addressing his missive to this house, as he did not remember her own address. His tone to Janet was different from that he employed to Helen. Janet, impulsively, as usual, tore up the stairs two at a time to show the letter to me. In direct contrast to Helen, Janet told on herself, lacked reserve. Her transparency was part of her ruthless honesty. Janet scarcely ever held herself in leash. It is my opinion that Janet could not live without telling, talking, explaining. She thought aloud, built aloud, conceived and bore in words. Even when she lied, as she sometimes did, she seemed to lie openly; that is to say there was always at least one person at whom she winked her eye, whom she took into her confidence, and to whom she confessed the fact that she was lying. Here she came flourishing a letter from Giles, imploring me to read it and give her my opinion. In it there was little formality, great warmth (for Giles). He apparently assumed

that his correspondent would give him a sympathy and an understanding it was unnecessary to define. For instance: *"The orchard is in blossom; pink and white flowers adorn the boughs, and they should fall on your hair while you dance. There will be a full moon to-morrow. Unfortunately no jasmine bush on the walls of this house. That was two years ago. I was afraid then—as I am a trifle afraid now. Yes, I am mortally afraid, now I reflect—and with reason. Under the blossoming trees, the grass is long and of tender green, with bluebells and narcissi making poetry of the orchard. So much beauty is wasted. You should be here to grow ecstatic over it—ecstatic as only you know how, with little fists tightly clenched and your face screwed up. And talking of fists, I recollect a pair of scratched hands and what they meant to me and what I feel now when I come to think of them. All because of those lines from* "The Grove":

> *"I have a phantom self that walks abroad to greet*
> *The ghost of a still living man——*

Oh, Janet, how could you? You will never excel that."

There was a curl of triumph about Janet's mouth as I looked up after reading the letter, a gurgle, I thought, had risen to her throat which, because I was Helen's mother, she succeeded in suppressing. Her elation was quite frankly due to his admiration.

That he should have come under her spell pleased her vastly; but did I not detect the faintest inflection of malice in her laugh, the slightest hint of sardonic amusement in the brightness of her eyes? The conquest of Giles made her chuckle. "He, too, the fool!" I fancied her gaiety spelt. Giles, I thought, was right to be afraid. I had, however, no pity on him. Janet could do her worst, for all I cared. I asked her about it: "Are you attracted by Giles?"

She stood, thoughtful for a moment, before replying. Then, to my astonishment, she said: "Attracted, yes. I think I could fall in love with Giles. Partly because I wouldn't have to be afraid of hurting him. He's as free and self-centred as I, he wouldn't, couldn't make anyone really part of his life as some people do. One would mean just so much and no more, to him. And if he would expect me to make him part of my life, well, I just couldn't, and he'd have to lump it, that's all."

I nodded and wondered, if this business worked itself out, which of the two would come out of it with the fewest scars!

She followed me down to the pantry. Somehow she had, for some weeks now, taken it upon herself to help me to arrange the flowers twice a week. Helen, with characteristic indolence, took little interest in beautifying our home, partly because she disapproved of its old-fashioned what she termed "dowdy" style, and partly (Fie, Helen!) because

she was so possessive that only the most personal ownership of a place or object could evoke her enthusiasm. Thus her own bedroom always looked charming, with a display of the greatest taste and care, while the rest of the house could, as far as she was concerned, look as it pleased.

Kitting was still at school, now working for matriculation. It had been decided that she would go on to the university. In this way it fell to Janet to help me, a labour which she performed with obvious pleasure.

She laid down the tattered exercise book, with its pencil on a string, that served her for manuscript, and took a silver bowl. Janet was scarcely ever parted from her manuscript. She could work anywhere and at any time: after dinner, while Oliver fidgeted with the radio, or Kitting strummed at the piano, or Christopher read aloud; out on a picnic, with everyone romping around her; sitting on the stairs waiting to go out, while the other two girls titivated, powdered their noses, and gave final pats to their hair. I do not believe she ever sat down at a table for a whole hour with the express purpose of working.

To-day she took up a bunch of marigolds and, seizing a knife energetically, cut the damp string—and her thumb. All she did was to suck hard at the cut at intervals and to continue arranging the flowers; she took very little notice of her hurt thumb, as

if she were of the opinion that her hands were already so disfigured that one blemish more or less was of small consequence. She paused for an instant in her activities and caressed the silver bowl. Then her eyes filled with tears and she gulped. "It's all so sad," she contrived to say, her voice breaking a little.

"What is, darling?" I asked, purposely obtuse.

"Everything. Helen and all. And you and this dear, darling time-worn bowl." She put the flowers into the bowl and placed it on a table near the sink, then sat down jerkily on a stool and went on talking and crying a little. "That bowl is a symbol of what fashion can do. You know as well as I that this dear solid, chased silver is not in the mode. You should put marigolds in blue china—or in cut glass, to say the least, to be up to date. Oh, my dear, sweet, beloved friend," she cried suddenly, leaping up and kissing me, pressing me close to her and weeping. "You are so outmoded, you are so gentle and you suffer so—so decently. And your kind, and your kind of silverware, are going to get such a hell of a time, you're going to be put on the shelf, and for a long time you'll be of no consequence, no one will value you as you should be valued. Chased sterling silver isn't the fashion—not in anything! Can't you see? Oh, darling, please don't think I'm quite balmy, only it's all so sad, so dreadfully sad! If Helen had her way this house would be in excellent

taste, all oak and orange cretonne, neat and cool—and Kitting wouldn't care what it looked like. It's a dreadful house, my sweet"—here she began to laugh ruefully through her tears—"it's full of junk, old bits of pooh, cushions, fire irons, vinegar-and-oil paintings, carved mahogany furniture, flowered chamber pots (oh, darling, don't you know smart people don't have chamber pots any more? They're unsanitary!), and precious lovely bits of treasures, such as ivories and this silver—and I *adore* it! It means so much." She broke away from me and raised her chin. "It'll have to come back! I mean appreciation of it. The *botheration* of loving things."

It was then I took this fiery girl into my arms and kissed her tenderly. I loved her for her great reverence. "Darling, in the name of all outmoded things, I thank you!" I laughed.

It was only yesterday that I filled the big wooden trunk with the plate and silver which had been sorted for storage. Helen had picked up the chased silver bowl, scrutinized it carefully for a minute or two, had almost decided to take it to Wilton Crescent with her, when Jack objected to it on the grounds that, being hopelessly ornate and "Victorian," it didn't "go" with the rest of their house.

O Helen, O Kitting, O Oliver, Jack, and Giles. If I could keep it from you, I would: that day when,

relentlessly, you will be relegated to the storeroom, when you will be out of fashion and un-needed because you don't "fit." Alas, alas, it will come, and not all my mother's tears will be able to stay the cruel hands of Change. I would spare you, all you dear children. You will have to make way for progress as I have made way, stand aside for the new movement. All I hope is that your children will love you even as much as you love me, my dear ones.

It rained to-day, and the raindrops cling like crystal beads to the windowpane. As I write here the sun is forcing its way through a cloud. And I am, all at once, happy. Perhaps, my children, bitterness will not come so poignantly to you as to those of my generation: for you there was no Great War, there will not be the gap of "pre-war" and "post-war"—and you are harder.

The day will come! I need not grieve. Soon I shall, together with my silverware, be sought out and set up again. My silver and I suffer from being neither old nor young: ours the tragedy of middle age. Soon we shall be interesting because we shall be old. Then we shall be history. That will happen to you, too, one day, my children—and it is a privilege, provided you consider it such.

CHAPTER XII

OLIVER moved from this house two months ago, into an uncomfortable flat in Park Place. He had, for more than a year, longed to live in bachelor quarters. Ever since he started working at Peabody & Hootes' and began writing, it was his ambition to be alone, to be undisturbed in both his work and his play. He is at the office all day, so that he has very little time in which to sort out all his odds and ends and to pack those he wants. Naturally, the house is still full of his stuff: relics of his boyhood—old photographs, clothes, rackets, bats, skis, etc., for which he has no room in his flat. He has asked me to sort them; then two evenings a week he comes here to decide what he wishes to have packed and stored, and what things I may dispose of. I have been in his old room all afternoon surrounded by boxes and canvas kit bags and drawers taken from their chests that are piled up like large toy building bricks, across each other. And I have found a folder containing a few loose photographs. I wonder what he will do with the first photograph in the collection: that of Babs Mortimer in evening dress. Will he want to frame it? Little I know.

Who would bear sons? Who would watch and worry for years, only to be rewarded by either silence—or fear? It seems to me that every mother has to make this choice; she is either respected overmuch and her criticism regarded with apprehension, or else she is merely sweet mother in the home, kissed and told nothing. In either case, it appears, she is told nothing. One hears that many a mother is her son's chum. One hears and reads of what a great thing is the friendship between mother and son, how helpful to the boy, that there is no friend like a mother. These passionate devotions certainly exist. I wonder how useful they are. I have yet to meet the man who has genuinely benefited by a passionate devotion to his mother. This may sound cynical, nay, heretical, and will probably elicit a storm of abuse from all the women of my acquaintance. It is a bitter pill to swallow: that a mother's love should be her most bridled emotion; that the relationship should not become too close; that she should not force her boy to make her his confessor. And yet she must give all her attention to a complete study of him. She must always be there, always guessing, ready to receive, ready to give, absolutely generous. The feeling that his mother is a foolish woman or not a "sport" would probably embitter a man. It is the hardest job in the world: to be a mother of sons. Who would bear sons? Sons for other women to cosset?

Who would not bear sons? Who would forfeit the hope of sending conquerors out to subjugate to their wills the great world of adventure? Would deny herself the privilege of placing these human offerings upon the altars of the Lord of Life? Forego the thrill of waiting for the answered prayer: that the living torch, having taken its light from her body, should leave her and flame through the earth? Sons, builders of the earth! Sons, woman's utter and final obeisance to Creation, to God? There is ecstasy in such abandonment, in such abnegation of self, in the proud consciousness of making gifts of live men to the world, in the agony of self-denial implied. Sons leave you, if they are the sons that make strong men; loving you dearly and weeping for you and over you, they leave you none the less, in a way that daughters never leave you, if they care for you at all. Daughters can travel to distant lands, over vast oceans, but in spirit they do not leave you. Men leave their mothers as soon as they are away from the parental roof, be they even in the same city. Those women who speak of the sacrificial love of motherhood are the mothers of men. Yet, who would not bear sons? "Woman, why weepest thou? . . ."

Oliver took Babs out to a party scarcely a week after they met. The girls and I found Babs pathetic because she apparently adored Oliver and seemed

so flattered by his interest in her. Once or twice I itched to slap the boy's face, he behaved in such a patronizing manner, was nonchalant and ungallant with her; but I then reflected that I had, in his education, striven specifically towards his happiness and his success, rather than sweetness of nature, and he seemed to be having a huge success with Babs. Giles, Christopher, even James were object lessons. It was not the gentleness of their natures that had got them anywhere. In any issue it was not they who suffered. There was value in their egotism; it gave them each a singleness of purpose; they wished most to have their own way—and had it. They knew it was fatal to their individual achievements to see any point of view save their own. And I knew it too. I reflected that all this talk of the equality of the sexes was mostly nonsense; it ceased to be nonsense only when women temporarily forgot sex, living and working as men, alone, and not in the sphere of emotion. Wherever or whenever women met men as female meets male, crash went any sense of equality, if balance was to be preserved. Kitting might be a man of science, but she became a mere female directly her senses and emotions came into play, somewhat maternal, gentle, in fact, long-suffering. Gladly she put up with Christopher the man, instinctively separating him from Christopher the fellow worker. And it was in the very nature of her submissiveness that Kitting found intense

joy, the joy that only faith and complete passivity can bring to a dominating and high-spirited woman in her relations with the man she desires and respects. Thus I had not taken any great pains to eradicate selfishness (of that certain emotional kind) and self-centredness from Oliver's make-up. In the man's world, the theory of the survival of the fittest still holds. Might is still right. Where it is still normal for a woman to give way in small things, not to dictate or not to be a leader, the man who is too unselfish, who allows himself to be dictated to or to be led, is a pathetic and ignoble creature.

Babs would say, shyly: "Shall we play tennis on Saturday afternoon, Oliver?"

And Oliver, frowning a little, would reply absently: "Saturday, let me see? Am I doing anything? No. I daresay that's all right."

I used to long to shake Babs until her teeth rattled, for inviting an answer of this kind and running after him, but I did not interfere. She was merely receiving what she asked for. On the other hand, it delighted me to hear the coolness of Helen's reply to Jack upon being asked to tea and cocktails on Sunday: "Let me see, can I? Oh, yes, that'll be all right. Five o'clock? So long."

And yet it seemed quite reasonable for Kitting to say frankly to Christopher: "Hey, you, big boy! Yes, *you,* chap, I'm addressing you, don't you hear me? Wake up! You're lunching with me in the lab

to-morrow whether you like it or not. One o'clock. And if you're late I'll knock your block off." No one could accuse Kitting of running after Christopher. She could say and do nearly anything when adopting that "rough-stuff" attitude. It merely made Christopher chuckle. Ever since she had fallen from her horse he was quite frank in his appreciation of her.

Giles was in an awkward position these days. Babs Mortimer was staying at his London home: Janet, during her sister's absence in the country once again, was staying at ours. And Giles was daily growing more deeply interested in Janet. I said to myself: "When an irresistible force meets an immovable object, what happens?" Here were two absolute egocentrics, two positives, waging a pitched battle. Neither Janet nor Giles ever wanted to do the listening or the applauding; nor did either ever wish to be impressed. Both were out to be heard, to be applauded, to create impressions. The one great difference was that Janet, unlike Giles, did not possess a jealous nature; she was so utterly self-sufficient and so self-confident as to be completely generous. The jealous possessive nature of Giles, as in the case of his affair with Helen, again asserted itself. It appears that the first of the inevitable quarrels between Janet and Giles took place on account of Janet's friendship with James.

I was vastly amused at Janet's attitude. She came to find me in my bedroom, where I was packing to

go away for the summer, as usual. This year we were going abroad. Her mouth was set, her eyes like slits. A most dramatic face had Janet.

"God," she spat, "what the hell does that boy think he is? God? And what does he take me for? Miss Babs Mortimer? What *is* it, I ask you? Are girls so crazy about him that he thinks he can dictate to all of them?"

"Yes," I replied, looking at her squarely. "I believe it's that."

Janet looked as if she wondered what I was driving at. Then: "Oh, me," she said. "There's a lot to understand in him that I understand."

"What did you say to him?"

"I?" she laughed contemptuously. "I seized him by the scruff of the neck, worried and shook him, and flung him into a corner."

"Wildcat!"

She took a cigarette and puffed at it energetically.

"It's sex with Giles and me. He's the only picturesque young man I know who has brains. I'm ditto girl to him."

It was my turn to laugh. "Oh, it's a good thing you're so clear about it! It would be too bad to be so old-fashioned as to be the least bit bewildered by your love for each other!"

"Ouch! Irony!"

Yes, sex. I believed her. There was something sexual in the very curve of her neck with the wanton

dark curls flying out from the nape. Something provocative in the way her hair sprang up in waves from her round forehead. Her eyes were grey, but so dark that most people thought they were brown; they were passionate eyes, and her best feature. Her nose was strong as a cat's, and her mouth the most childishly sensual I have ever seen, although not over full: wide, rather, and mobile: in rare repose it was a trifle sullen. And Janet, in her new womanhood, did not have a figure, she had a body. That is the only way I can describe it. It was taut and like an animal's and it was there definitely, naked, even under many clothes, lean but not skinny, seeming ever ready to twist and move, like her mouth. (Thank God, Oliver had escaped!)

"What about Giles do you find sexually attractive?"

"Bad eyes; wicked, you know," she replied without hesitation. "I like the way the upper lid hangs so low it almost hides half the pupil. I like his mouth. And his arms and shoulders, and the arrogant, controlled way he moves, and his long legs and lean thighs. Oh, yes, and his nostrils. We're awfully alike in so many ways—and I like that too. He can't cheat me. He is mysterious, but I can read the mysteries. Oh, gosh, he's damned attractive!" She suddenly spun around and stamped both feet. "Like a blooming gipsy!"

"So are you!"

"Oh, no, no! I hate the bastard. I won't see him any more!"

"Rot. But you're being silly, Janet. Awfully silly."

"No, I'm not," answered Janet, suddenly quiet. "I know exactly what I'm at. He can't get away with anything with me. I seem to have a sixth sense about him. I know what's coming. I don't give in an inch, not an inch. He can crawl, if he likes. Not," she added with fine disdain, "like that poor little fool Babs Mortimer with Oliver; she gives me a pain. Oliver is attractive, you know."

"Fairly. Too conventional to be . . . a gipsy!"

She snorted. "Darling Aunt Elsa, you and X couldn't produce a really ordinary, conventional son. You've tried, the Lord knows! But he has a lazy charm and good fellowship that 'registers.' Gawd, that poor wench!"

"Why do you pity her so? How do you know she isn't going to nab Oliver and laugh last and longest?"

"Is that what you're afraid of? Ha, ha! Not Oliver!"

I shrugged my shoulders. I had met Babs's kind in my girlhood, only less blatant in behaviour. And I felt sure Oliver was not really even infatuated with her, much less in love.

That evening, Jack having taken Helen out dancing, and Kitting having bullied Christopher into working late in their laboratory, I found myself

alone with my son. We both sat in armchairs, with books in our laps. I looked up.

"How is Babs?" I asked.

"How should I know?" he grunted.

"Darling, don't mix us up! I'm not Babs. Don't use that tone to me!"

"What tone? Oh, sorry. But how *should* I know?"

"Haven't you heard from her?"

"Oh, well, she's all right."

Back to our books again. Later:

"When is Babs's birthday?" I asked.

"Haven't the foggiest," he replied, apparently engrossed in his reading. He turned a page.

"I thought I heard it was this month, and we might give her a birthday party," I suggested. He remained unmoved. "D'you think that'd be fun?"

James's son. I got nothing out of him.

"Darling, don't you like Babs?"

"Oh, she's all right."

"No more than that?"

He shifted. "Mother, Babs is a decent sort. Nice, simple kid, with no side. A jolly good dancer. Likes games and all that. None of that hothouse rot—or clever back-chat, like some young ladies I know. No nonsense, either."

"No?"

For the first time he closed his book and looked me in the face.

"No," he said. "No, definitely not. Can't people just be friends?"

That, thought I, was that.

I gave Miss Mortimer a little dance that month in spite of Oliver's seeming indifference. She was touched, and shyly kissed me. I was so sorry for her. I knew her parents were really rather badly off, and she would never have a coming-out ball. They could not really afford to give her a season in London. It was nice of Giles's mother to put her up. I asked her parents and Giles's parents too. Mrs. Mortimer was truly grateful. She was an unobtrusive, quite distinguished woman of about fifty, the usual, unimaginative, innocuous, long-ago-good-looking mother of the débutante. She was a perfect portrait of a nought. I marvelled at her lack of personality.

There was a strain between Helen and Giles that was of Helen's making. Oh, Helen, Helen! Giles's feeling for her was dead. He was unself-consciously charming to her—he felt so detached that he could afford to be. He had no sense-memory of her. Not so Helen. Among the ashes there was still one bitter ember that glowed enough to give pain. Dutifully they danced one waltz together, Giles's eyes following Janet's figure greedily and a little anxiously.

Christopher and Kitting capered around the room in huge glee. Of all the couples there, they seemed

to be having the most fun. To those two, who spent nearly all their leisure time in their laboratory, an event such as this constituted a real spree. Kitting's dancing was not too bad, considering her limp. Presently, joined by Janet, they went over to the buffet and drank claret cup. It was typical of Janet to become bored with the young men who crowded around her, and to join her "bosom friend."

"You look as if you were having a really good time," she complained to Kitting and Christopher, "may I join you?"

"We *are* having a good time," replied Christopher, "aren't you?"

"I would be, if everyone but you didn't seem to have forgotten how to laugh. Christopher, will you go and find me a *gay* cavalier?"

Giles, dancing past with Helen, heard her and glowered. She had spoken at the top of her voice.

Near me were Giles's mother, Mrs. Mortimer, and one of the other mammas. I heard snatches of their talk. I heard:

"Who is that nice, fresh-faced girl laughing over there by the buffet?" And the voice of Mrs. Mortimer replying: "That's the youngest daughter, Katherine—Kitty, I think they call her. The brains of the family, I hear." And Giles's mother: "Oh, yes, they say she's a genius. Going to be a scientist, you know, quite remarkable. She is the youngest student in the whole university, and Giles tells me that Pro-

fessor . . ." The rest was lost. My Kitting. My little girl. My heart swelled with pride.

Oliver danced often with Babs. They never talked, it seemed like a form of exercise to them. I almost believed Oliver's "No nonsense." I supposed it was possible to regard pleasure, recreation, and amusement as a purely athletic pastime these days. Tennis partner, bridge partner, dancing partner. Nothing romantic. No nonsense. Well, if they felt that way, I was not going to be the one to foist any romantic business onto their unwilling backs. One liked tennis, dancing, and bridge, and one had to have someone to play with: here was someone. Why drag "love" or "attraction" into it? They both looked nice and were experts. How foreign to me! Much more understandable was the relationship of Kitting and Christopher. He trod on her toes when they danced; she laughed and affectionately called him names. There was a sense of one-ness, a depth of understanding between those two, and they were gaily glad of the excuse to hug one another around the room. The intimacy of dancing was simply grand —even if one or the other danced none too well.

I understood Giles and Janet. Both danced perfectly; they were pagan, both of them. They could never have clung together in that complete unity of rhythm had they had no appetite, one for the other. Passion lay at the root of their dancing. But I heard Giles say to Janet, in an irritated tone of voice:

"Will you *please* not try to lead?" And her reply, aggressively: "Then for God's sake *keep time!* I can't help being a good dancer, and the *slightest* fault in time gets my goat."

I could see why Helen and Jack danced together with pleasure. Helen reposed, dreamily, in Jack's arms, while he led her, blissfully aware of her nearness. He danced smoothly, she could relax. Peace.

James sat in a corner, watching, amused, a little above it all.

Janet and Giles floated round again. He leant forward and whispered something in her ear, his eyes melting. I saw her catch her breath and then look up at him. Adoration, nothing else.

Like stolid fairies Oliver and Babs again danced past, business-like and unsmiling, their thoughts elsewhere. Exercise.

I glanced at Mrs. Mortimer. She was watching her daughter and my son hopefully. There was nothing in my son's demeanour to feed her hope, thought I.

"How beautifully they dance together!" sighed Mrs. Mortimer ecstatically; "they are just the right height for one another." I mumbled something, and she continued: "It is so nice of your son to take her out so often."

Ho, ho, thought I, and grew a little indignant.

Not for anything in the world would I have said a similar thing. What chance had that wretched

child with a mother who considered Oliver's nonchalant condescension a kindness? I longed to say: "No wonder your girl puts up with my brute of a son if you don't give her a better conceit of herself. For the love of heaven, get her to feel that she is giving something, that it's the boy who is lucky to have the opportunity of taking such a sweet, pretty girl about! Don't make her feel she is accepting *charity!* You're almost like a Chinese peasant. In a moment I'll expect you to refer to your daughter as 'this utterly worthless slave.'" I merely said: "Good gracious, Mrs Mortimer, the kindness is on *her* side. I marvel over her good-nature at his boorishness sometimes."

"Oh, boys will be boys," simpered Mrs. Mortimer.

The band stopped playing, and the couples strolled over to the buffet. Janet somehow contrived to lose Giles and made her way over to James. She sat down beside him and took one of his hands in both of hers. She began to talk eagerly. Giles sauntered over to his mother. Christopher and Kitting began to descend the steps to the garden; Kitting almost tripped on the way down, so Christopher picked her up and carried her. Babs and Oliver stood by the buffet, glasses in their hands, solemnly eating sandwiches, without saying a word. Presently, Oliver came up to me. His face broke into a broad smile.

"Dance, Mum?" he asked.

"No, darling, you dance with some pretty girl."

"Not dance a single dance with the son and heir? Why, shame! Not let me dance with my best girl, even once?" He laughed and, seizing me somewhat roughly around the waist, fox-trotted off with me. What a darling he was. Janet was right, he had charm.

"I'm not the dancer I was," I apologized, as he swung me around.

"Rot, you're grand. And you look awfully nice to-night, Mum. I've never seen that dress, have I?"

"No, it's new." This was *my* Oliver, the Oliver his family knew, good-tempered and cheerful and pleasant. Who and what was that taciturn boor he had conjured up for Babs's especial benefit?

"Are you having a nice time?" I asked him.

"Topping. I say, you're a topping dancer!" He laughed, and there was pride and delight in his astonishment. I decided that my son was really fond of me. "We've never really danced before, not since I was a kid, have we?"

"Not since I first taught you to waltz. Oh, do you remember?"

"Do I? I was in Etons then, and you told me not to stick out my behind. D'you know, I've never forgotten that tip? I don't stick out my behind when I dance, do I?"

Christopher and Kitting, back in the drawing room, bumped into us.

"You two certainly seem to have plenty to talk about!" cried Kitting. "Haven't you ever met before?"

"I've just discovered Mum's a whopping good dancer," returned my son. "She's a marvel!"

"May I have the next?" laughed Christopher.

"Certainly not. I'm not giving this party so that I can dance with all the young men myself!"

But I danced the next dance with Christopher. I did not get on so well with him, so we made a kind of pretence of waltzing and talked most of the time. We discussed Babs and Oliver.

"Oliver is not rude and yokelish by nature," I declared. "Why is he like that with poor Babs?"

"Listen, Elsa. He can afford to be as flirtatious as he likes with his mother. She won't go goo-goo and imagine he's in love with her and want to marry her! Unless he keeps up this kind of army discipline with Miss Mortimer, she will. That's all there is to it."

"Christopher, are you modern enough to understand this affair? I mean, seeing a girl three or four times a week and nothing emotional in it at all? It beats me."

"That's because you're hopelessly romantic, my sweet. He likes her. Of course he likes her. And

she's sort of in calf-love with him. Get rid of all your old-fashioned prejudices, and you'll see it all right. She's fond of amusement. He needs a partner. It's a kind of business arrangement, only not a frank one. For the price of a dinner and dance or a game of tennis, she gives her time, her presence and her attention. If it weren't for him she couldn't have what is commonly called a good time. But Oliver's got his head screwed on. He never ceases to remind her by every deed and gesture and silence that there's no more to it than that. And don't you go screaming against that girl. She's perfectly fair and dignified in her own eyes. If she were his secretary, she'd say: 'What time in the morning, sir?' wouldn't she? Well, as it is, she says: 'Do we play tennis on Saturday?' Fair enough. It's the same kind of arrangement as a governess living *au pair,* you know."

"I see," said I. A little strange, I thought, but I did see. It was disappointing to think of Oliver purchasing company, at that age. It was so cold and bloodless. And, on the other hand, it was honest and uncompromising and clean not to flirt or play at love-making. Yet I was filled with a great sadness; I cannot describe what a sadness I felt. Sadness over the pathetic, analytical, disillusioned age my children lived in, that such a thing were possible as the relationship between Oliver and Babs. . . .

At one o'clock James was still sitting in his corner. He looked tired. The room was fairly hot, and

I suggested that he should sit by the open window and breathe some fresh air. Together we crossed the room. Outside, down in the garden, a couple were walking up and down. All at once a man's voice rose in despair: ". . . You hardly looked at me all tonight. . . . When you were dancing with others you looked so gay and happy. I tried to catch your eye several times, but you never even looked at me! I've spent a wretched evening! You sat beside that old fossil for hours. What is it that you see in that man?"

Then, a woman's voice, low and vibrant. "We'll always make each other miserable. We're both too difficult. Let's say 'Good-bye' now. If we don't we'll only regret it forever."

"Good-bye." Then a pause. Then suddenly a cry of sheer anguish, and a sob, and a man weeping: "Oh, I love you so! I love you, I love you!" And the woman's voice, sobbing and laughing: "Oh, what fools we are, what fools! I love you too, my only love. Sh! sh! Don't cry, my love, my love!" And a passionate embrace. . . .

I looked at James. He had turned a sickly white. And seeing his face made my own heart beat wildly. I felt a trifle nauseated with the shock of my sudden profound misery.

I wanted to get out of the house and walk and walk and walk. I wanted to laugh. James had often looked troubled over her, had loved her, I knew.

Who was I to be pained by this? I had loved Christopher, but not like this. O God, not like this!

I found myself in my bedroom. And then I began to cry. Oh, James, James! If only I could feel the comfort of James near me; my young lover, the boy who only yesterday bought the C minor Bach record, my boy-husband, the father of my children. Like a drowning person my memory was sharp and vivid and clear. I lay there on my bed for about ten minutes. Then, with a jerk, I arose, bathed my face, powdered my nose and composed myself. Hysteria, I told myself sharply, the proven fear. From downstairs the music came up to me.

"Dry yo' tears, sister,
Dry yo' tears!"

The dance was still on. I had scarcely been missed. But Giles and Janet had disappeared. I looked for them everywhere. I brushed past the silly, giggling, wiggling, idiotic couples on the floor (that was how they struck me then) and heard someone humming. "Dry yo' tears"—"it's my favourite tune," she said.

"Janet! Janet!" I called. "Has anyone seen Janet?"

"Why, Mummie, what is it?" Kitting asked me. I remember vaguely that she looked troubled. Christopher seized me very firmly by the arm. He said: "Elsa, I saw Giles and Janet go out. What are you

worried about? They'll be back. It's hot in here; they've probably gone for a spin in his car. Do compose yourself, my dear."

"They'll be back!" I echoed. I really wanted to laugh, all of a sudden. Giles had wept. I had heard him. The conceited, cruel pup who had hurt my Helen had squealed. Janet had the power to hurt him. I shook myself. Oh, what was the matter with me? That was a terrible, uncivilized, vengeful thought! I had, deep down in me, hoped she would hurt him exactly as he had hurt my girl, no more and no less. But what was the use of such a mean thought? What purpose would be served by revenge? Fie! For shame!

Would this evening never end? It was a nightmare. I thought: What would happen if, for only two minutes, Truth reigned? Helen lying, living a lie, would stop dancing with Jack, that pleasant, excellent youth who meant nothing to her. If I said: "Stop it. Roots. Your life is warped by that young sheik, that innocent bounder who could not have spoiled your future happiness more if he had raped you! Babs, get out before Oliver can do the same! Kitting, don't let Christopher own your soul! It doesn't pay! Janet, go to bed with them all and get it over! They all want you! Or else get out!" From there on my thoughts spiralled into incoherence and gibbered under the roof of my head, making grimaces and noises that had a peculiar significance but

made no sense. The face of James haunted me, and I hated it. And sometimes it was Christopher's face.

I sat beside Kitting and Christopher until, at long last, the party was over. My guests bade me good-night and thanked me. It was almost three. The irony of it was that it had been a truly enormous success—the party. Giles and Janet returned, Janet wind-blown and dishevelled and laughing, after a drive in an open car. Thank God, they were back. What had I imagined? Again I wanted to laugh. *What on earth had I imagined?* At last the guests had all gone.

I dragged myself to my room. Oliver came to say good-night. In his hand he held a photograph. "Let's see," said I mechanically.

"Only Babs. She brought it to-night."

We scrutinized it together. It was quite a good likeness, smile and all. I was terribly tired, all at once.

"I don't like the dress. Told her so. A silly dress," said Oliver.

It was the dress she had worn to-night. "You didn't tell her so?" I cried, aghast, suddenly wide-awake again.

"Yes, I did," he boasted.

I burst into tears. Oh, the cruelty, the arrogant, mean cruelty of those who do not love to those who do!

"Why, Mother!" exclaimed Oliver.

"Oh, you rotten, self-righteous, arrogant male! I'm ashamed of you!" I sobbed. "It would have killed you, wouldn't it, to have let her have this evening in complete happiness? Your insensitiveness and unkindness appal me! Get out of my room! Get out!"

"Why, M-mother," stammered Oliver, distressed, his face twitching, "I—I—didn't——"

"Get out! Good-night!"

"Mother, just a minute. I don't know what—what made me say I told her that. It isn't true. I don't know w-why I said that. I didn't tell her——"

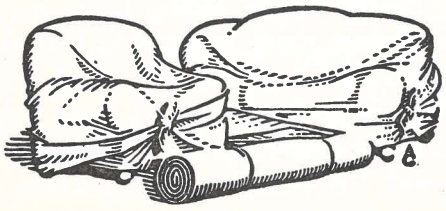
"You swear you didn't?"

"I swear it!" He took me in his arms, contritely. "Don't cry, Mum. I don't know why I made myself out such a cad. I told her it was a topping dress and she looked stunning——"

I began to laugh. So did Oliver, hugging me.

"But I *think* it's a foul dress just the same," he whispered, "and I don't like the photo!"

Then we both began to laugh awfully.



CHAPTER XIII

IN THE autumn of the year following Babs Mortimer's dance, *Corpse Mountain* appeared and created a furore. We had spent the summer in Switzerland; it had rained rather a lot and we all returned to London in September in a somewhat depressed frame of mind, feeling we had been cheated. No one had been allowed to read James's war novel until it actually came out in print; when it was finally published, the entire family sat down to read it at the same time. For over a week its strange and horrible power cast its gloom over the household. After a book like that, we felt there can never, never, be another war. I shuddered when I read it. I shudder now when I recall certain passages in it, and gooseflesh rises on my limbs when I think of how most of it came to be written. The stark, bitter tragedy of it, and the consummate, agonizing beauty of the ending broke my heart.

Pride in James, rising in my throat, chokes me as I write here. And I am proud indeed. Oh, please, God, perhaps in my humble way I was a help to him. Perhaps that has been the reason for my existence. Who knows? Perhaps this poor shadow, Elsa, in

his background, gave him a sense of security and comfort. That is my hope. If ever I suffered loneliness, his success has amply repaid me. I do not, cannot, complain. God forgive me if ever I complained. There could never be bitterness for me again. All bitterness has been taken from me. It is as if this divine music that I play pervades my soul now, and a wordless prayer seals my heart against anything but peace. . . .

I play my piano and I allow myself to be carried away. Yesterday. No, no, in my last life—so long is it, so very long ago.

Oh, why do the tears rain down my cheeks? I am not unhappy. Indeed, I am at peace because I am fulfilled. It is all so clear. Not for me the disillusionment of futility. Not for me many a wife's plaint: "Why? *He* wasn't worth it!" Not for me the agony of hard, failing children. (Oh, why, why, why do I weep so?) My heart is too full. Lord Life, take this burden of joy from me! Hear my hymn of Thanksgiving, because soon my soul will burst with it and scatter itself! Ease this awful ecstasy that is akin to pain.

The following spring, Janet M——'s "The Grove," with its dedication simply "To X," was published by Peabody & Hootes. For seven years Janet had been working at it; it epitomized Janet's sense of beauty. It created quite a stir, and Oliver was very proud of both it and Janet, for it was he

who had first brought it to the notice of old Mr. Hootes, the senior partner in the firm, an old crony of James's. Incidentally, Peabody & Hootes were also James's publishers.

We saw less of Janet these days. James saw much less of her than of old. Alas, times were changing. The autumn seemed a little sadder than usual. The children, all more or less grown-up now, went their own ways. Kitting and Christopher took a room for a laboratory, near the university, and Kitting was hardly ever at home in the daytime except on Sundays. Helen, the best dressed girl in her "set," went out a great deal with Jack, dancing and driving, playing golf and riding in Richmond Park. He adored her; she was foreign to him, a mystery, (shallow or unfathomable? Who could tell? Melancholy or merely moody? Remote and cool or reserved?) Were her outbursts of affection genuine or the result of a sense of duty? Did she love or only strive to love her young "beau"? She intrigued him wonderfully. Amazingly, Oliver and Babs carried on their platonic friendship, Babs more irritatingly docile than ever. This was, of course, only during the holidays—for Oliver was now at Oxford. During term time she wrote him long letters, so I heard, in a large, round hand, on pages and pages of thick, sky-blue paper. He replied with curt notes all about himself.

Giles, so Janet told me, was writing a book. A

book of critical essays with illustrations. "This writing epidemic!" as Janet exclaimed, "is getting worse than stage fever." Later, Giles contracted stage fever as well (not the actual performing variety, though) and fulfilled Christopher's prophecy by becoming interested in "The Theatre of To-day."

Before we knew where we were, the Easter vacation was upon us again. *Corpse Mountain* had gone into innumerable impressions and was being translated into several foreign languages. It seemed incredible that only a short time ago James had been comparatively unknown. At this time, had he been a little less of a hermit, he would have been lionized. The title of his book was on all lips, from royalty to grocers' assistants (who had not the vaguest idea of the author's name). Instead of being happy about his success, James grew embarrassed. He said it did not suit his style to be the author of a best-seller. . . .

One day, just as I was prepared to go out to do some shopping, Helen dashed into the hall, seized my hand and dragged me back into the drawing room. "Mummie," she said, "I want to talk to you." Her tone was so matter-of-fact that I supposed the subject of discussion was to be a party or a new dress, and she was in a hurry to make a decision. "I want to get married." I sat and stared at her. It was on the tip of my tongue to say, in a tone I have

used not long ago: "Yes, darling, presently, when you grow up. One has to be grown-up to marry, you know." I bit my lip.

"Yes," she continued coolly, "Jack and I think it's a good idea. There's nothing to keep us. What should we wait for?"

"You're both so young," I demurred, having recovered my wits, "especially Jack."

"Well," she replied with the faintest trace of impatience, "there seems no point in waiting till one's not young. We're not any younger than you and Daddie were. We've known each other for over a year, and we don't quarrel. Jack's quite well off, we could have everything, and—and I like him."

"Enough?"

The tears welled in Helen's eyes. "Oh, of course I do!" she cried, far too emphatically. And I suddenly sounded the depths of my child's unhappiness, and a sickening fear clutched at my heart lest she should never, never recover from the pain of her first love. Ah, how careful one should be with the crystal pool that is one's life! One drop of muddy water, and the pool can be sullied and spoiled forever. It horrified me to think that Helen should carry a scar for the rest of her life, even a scar, long after the wound had healed. I sat there, utterly helpless, and she flung herself into my arms and wept. I wept too. If only I could help her. . . .

"You mustn't marry Jack if you feel like this."

"I'll always feel like this," she sniffed. "Don't you understand? So long as I live I'll never *really* forget. Only I won't cry after a time, just as I haven't cried for a year. You don't seem to understand. I adore Jack, he's an angel. He's so sweet, I couldn't help loving him. Only . . . only . . ." she broke again. Oh, I did understand, if only she knew. Why don't our children credit us with understanding, more often? I suppose it is because we fail to take them into our confidence, do not let them see clearly enough that we are, after all, merely older and more experienced editions of themselves, that we have been through everything they have been through. . . . It is bad for us, too, not to talk openly more often; it prevents us from refreshing our memories, and they die, and we truly forget the emotions of the past and thereby grow old. That is growing old: forgetting. And our children cannot lay themselves open to the misunderstanding criticism of old people. Oh, now I am allowing myself to sink into waves of sentiment, and they carry me back. I choose soft music and conjure up yesterday. Mush, sentiment. A good cry. Helen, in the peach-coloured ball dress, radiant, as yet unhurt, her curls still long and rich, her soul still warm and soft. A dimple in one cheek, eyes burning blue. A poem—her last. No, no, it is no man's fault and no woman's. That is life. Life has changed her, and her own character made her vulnerable. Life

discovered her weaknesses and struck just at those very weaknesses. What a change. Thinner, her curls shorn, her hair set in neat waves, pale, languid, and sophisticated, lazier than ever, still a liar, but not a trace of poetry left in her make-up. . . .

I see again Helen, not yet sixteen, speechless with emotion, a tear in each blue eye, gazing at the ceiling. And now, cool and hard, "I want to get married." Poor Jack, poor, poor Jack. . . .

"Helen, my sweet," I said, "it wouldn't be fair to marry Jack. You see, I know how you *could* care for someone—and one day you will again, and Jack only knows you now. He thinks that this is all of you. It isn't fair to give a man a bit when he's entitled to a whole." Helen blew her nose. "That's just it," she replied, "I wouldn't be cheating. He only wants what he sees. And, Mummie, you're wrong: *that's* all over; I'll never love anyone better now than I love Jack. *He'll* never be sorry, I can promise that. And if he loves me—and he does—I can make him happy." The tears were still in her eyes, but she had composed herself. "Dear heart, don't be in a hurry. You've plenty of time."

"We want to get married," she repeated, "and one day we shall." I sighed, and we left it at that.

While Oliver was at Oxford, Kitting distinguished herself at University College, London, and Helen continued her study of physical charm. Janet's book had made her the delight and heroine

of her entire circle of friends with the sole exception of Giles, who was annoyed by the dedication. She still pursued her hectic quarrelling affair with him. She had accumulated a group of acquaintances, semi-Bohemian, semi-"social," and I often wondered at the time whether the relationship of those two, under their influence, had remained on its romantic plane, or whether Janet had not seduced him. Kitting said: "Of course they've lived together, don't be silly. What do you take Janet for? Do grow up, Mummie." And she laughed. I started to argue with Kitting, but she tossed her head and said: "If she wants to enough, why shouldn't she? We might as well make up our minds about Janet. She's a strange creature, a cat that walks alone. You don't see Janet as a nice sweet little wife with babies, do you? She's an adventuress by nature, a born one. Ordinary standards won't ever apply to her. And I suppose she'll have dozens of men in her life. She's just a savage." "Giles," I said, "is more than an adventure to her. She is quite sincere about her feeling for him, although I don't suppose they'll ever marry. They'll fight and break up before they get a chance to."

Again Kitting laughed. "Don't deceive yourself, Mummie! She's sincere in all her moods and about everything she does and feels. But she's got room for so much. I'm fond of Jan, and I understand her perfectly. She doesn't see why she should limit her-

self. She isn't a chooser yet, doesn't see why she couldn't both eat and have her cake because of a few silly moral codes. You see, she adores Daddie, and she adores Giles. Giles wants to limit her adoration to himself; and she won't do that, and she's quite right. Just because we're lucky enough to be tamer and instinctively more law-abiding than she is, we've no right to judge her."

"I don't judge her."

"No, but you want to play shut-eye to her real nature, because you feel you *ought* to throw a few pebbles if she is technically a wrong 'un. Face it that she's a so-called sinner, and like her! Realize that Helen and I are not ladies of overdeveloped physical passions, that we're not in the least polyandrous, and thank your stars, because it's just an accident!"

I had to laugh too. It was all so very modern, and daring, and Kitting looked such a baby. She went on:

"But, my word, what a bad quarter of an hour she's going to give Giles! One day he'll wake up, and she'll be gone. And Giles isn't Janet, you know. He finds her quite sufficient; she's ten women to him, she's all he wants and needs—and more. But he isn't all men to her, and that's where the rub will come."

Christopher sucked at his pipe, and his eyes twinkled. "Serves him right, the God-damn orchid.

I hope she gives him hell," he murmured. "Unfortunately, the sea is full of fish."

"Exactly," argued Kitting, "fish like Babs, but not mermaids like Janet. Janet's unique, and he knows it, and he's in a mortal funk that she'll leave him flat."

I pondered that. "It's true," I agreed, "and Janet's a terrible heart breaker. She is a mermaid, a sprite, and she will cause many a tragedy before she's through, because she doesn't know it. 'The Mermaid Who Thought She Was a Fish, a Story about the Poetess, Janet M.'"

"Yes," Kitting went on, "she is the kind of person one would want to put in a book. Did you know she's starting to write prose?"

"What a pity!" I exclaimed, "that'll be the end of her as a poetess."

"Janet——" began Kitting.

A door slammed, footsteps were heard in the hall. Janet's voice called, "Coo—oo!"

"Speak of the devil," laughed Christopher, as Janet blew into the room.

"Hullo, chaps!" she cried, "I haven't been near any of you for ages! Did I hear my name used in conversation as I came into the house? Didn't I hear Kitting say 'Janet'?"

"Of course you did," mocked Christopher. "As always, your immortal soul was under discussion. The last observation came from Elsa and was to the

effect that you would cease to write poetry now that you had begun to indulge in prose."

"Oh, no, no!" decided Janet, shaking her head forcefully, "I won't let that happen!" She clenched her teeth. "Already life is trying to seduce me from my dreams. It's awful. Elsa" (she had, of late, dropped the "aunt") "can help me if she wants to. She's been through it all. Haven't you, darling? In you there was fought a pitched battle, wasn't there, between the daydream and concrete thought? The other day I wrote a poem, and there's a bit of it that you should like, Elsa. You, you alone will appreciate it:

"I would return to the spring, to-day,
To the half-forgotten joys,
How, O how, shall I find the way
'Mid all this clamour and noise?
Alas, mankind exacts a toll
Of noise for its joy and strife.
How shall I hear the voice of my soul
Calling me back to my life?"

She stood for a moment, deep in thought, a vague look of unhappy fear in her eyes. I gazed at her in wonderment. How did she *know* all this? And how did she know that her poem would mean more to me than to some others? How could she read of the forfeited music in my life? How had she come to realize just what it had meant to me to give myself up to actualities; I who had, in another age,

been free as the wind? Did she alone realize that *Corpse Mountain* had been built partly over the bones of my dead imaginings, in order that James's imagination might continue to exist and develop unhindered? Someone had to see about the bread and butter, and seeing about the bread and butter had fallen upon me. And yet, the result being *Corpse Mountain,* how could I be sorry?

It was Christopher who broke the tension with his banter. "Popular authors at their favourite sports: Miss Janet M. recites her own poems at a friendly gathering. . . ."

"Now, don't say that's a habit of mine!" cried Janet, out of her musing, "it just happened to explain a mood——"

Kitting burst in with: "How's Giles? What news of Giles?"

"Giles is very well, thank you. His book's going to be good, too, believe it or not, as you please." She turned to me once more as if singling me out, as if I alone could understand her. "I'm in a quandary about Giles, Elsa. Do let me talk to you. Everyone in this world but you will misunderstand me. One day, very soon, I've got to leave Giles, partly for my own sake, but most of all for his. I'm spoiling him. Yes, I am——"

She was interrupted by an explosion of laughter from Christopher. "Shut up, Christopher. You know nothing about it!" She turned on Christopher,

a little angry now. "Oh, well, anyway," she said, "I don't want to talk about it now. I must be mad even to think of such a thing. Forgive me."

"Do go ahead!" Christopher said half-contritely, but his eyes were crinkled up with suppressed laughter. "I didn't want to stop you." Janet stood up squarely opposite him, and looking down on him as he sat sunk in his armchair, spoke with great seriousness, very quietly, almost unemphatically (for her). "Dear Christopher, I wish you were sensitive. You're missing an awful lot. You're missing oodles and oodles and buckets of Kitting."

"Hi!" cried my daughter, sitting up straight, "that's my affair!"

"Let me go on! I've always liked you, Christopher, and you've never liked me, never; but I haven't cared a fig——"

"You damned little fool!" said Christopher, grinning all over. "A lot you know, you complete nitwit."

"Shut up. Let me talk."

"D'you ever do anything else?" he retorted mercilessly.

"Shut up. I never get a chance with you about. I want to tell you that you can't for the rest of your life get up on your hind legs, then crash down on everything like a huge Saint Bernard pup. It won't always work."

"It has up till now!"

"No, it hasn't!" she flashed back. "I bet it hasn't! You can't always terrorize and startle people into giving way! You have various methods. I've studied them all. There's the 'bounce' method and the method of Utter Frankness, and the method of Profane Language, Rudeness, and Blasphemy. Then there's your charm, and then there's ridicule. You'd better stop that one soon, or you'll end up in a box of insincerity."

"Aw, that's what you say because you've no sense of humour!"

"Sense of humour!" Janet's mouth twisted in gentle disdain. "That's your favourite barricade, my good friend. You hide behind it, then throw bones, and say what you think, irrespective of any pain you may cause. Your sense of humour doesn't impress me."

"I can quite understand that!"

Janet bit her lip. Then, without warning, she deliberately gazed at Kitting's knee. And then she looked back at Christopher, straight in the eyes with a most uncanny, unblinking stare. Then, slowly, she smiled her most contemptuous smile. "You're welcome to your sense of humour," she whispered, "and so is everyone else."

Christopher sprang to his feet, his cheeks reddening.

"Of all the——"

"Don't call me names! Don't try any of your

'methods' on me. I won't be impressed. Not in the least."

"God, I wish you weren't a woman! Wouldn't I love to sock you."

"Go ahead; why don't you? Go ahead. But remember this: that however rude or brutal you are, *it won't reflect on me.* Why don't you hit me?" He faced her, his eyes blazing with temper. "You cad!" he muttered. She did not flinch, and she was still smiling. "I never said anything," she said. "You see how well I'm learning? This is my method, you see. Where's your sense of humour now? Where *is* that famous sense of humour?" They glared at each other in silence.

Then Christopher did a crazy, unexpected thing. He let out an enormous guffaw of laughter, cried: "Beaten! You've won your spurs!" and putting both arms around her, gave her a loud, smacking kiss on each cheek. Kitting threw back her head and laughed as I had seldom seen her laugh. Janet stood without moving, unbelieving, then, without a sound, she raised both hands to her face and fell quietly to weeping.

"Janet!" cried Christopher, sincerely perturbed; and Kitting leapt from her chair. They both kissed her, no longer laughing. She went on with her noiseless crying.

It had been Christopher's victory after all, thought I. She was broken.

"What a fool, what a fool I am!" she gasped as I led her to my bedroom. "And I wasn't crying because—because of what happened just now. No one will ever believe me. I swear it isn't that. Oh, my dear, dear friend, no one can ever guess what I've been through with—what it's been like—with Giles!"

"Janet, my poor baby, you've no mother. If I were your mother, I'd——"

"You'd ask me to put Giles out of my life, and that's just what I'm going to do!"

A few days later Giles came to the house. Janet was not there. He was very pale, evidently under a great emotional strain, and he asked to see Janet, if I pleased. He was very haughty.

"Janet is not here," I said. "I haven't seen her since Tuesday."

He looked at me aghast, his hauteur falling from him all in a moment. "Where is she? Don't you know? D'you mean to tell me you don't know? My God!"

"Don't you know? Isn't she at home?"

"I don't know. Possibly she's told the servant to lie. Every time I ring up her home I'm told she's out and has left no message. I haven't seen her for days. At last I thought I'd better try here."

It was my turn to be haughty. "Giles," I said, "I'm sure Janet is at home, and if she isn't at home

to you she probably has her reasons for not wishing to see you. It isn't for me to interfere."

He eyed me grimly. "Do I deserve this?" he asked, growing still paler.

"I know nothing about the whole matter."

"I have got to see Janet," he insisted, sitting down. "What shall I do?"

"I see," I replied in a noncommittal voice.

"You don't," he said harshly. "You don't see at all."

This was a Giles I did not know.

"Well, you can't order me about," I said. "I just won't put up with it. I take it that you and Janet had a quarrel and she now refuses to see you. I won't be dragged into it. In the old days you and Helen used to fight in the same way. I wasn't consulted in matters that concerned my own daughter. I don't see why I should help now. You were never particularly gracious or polite to me. You can hardly expect any sympathy from me at this moment. After all, I was only Helen's nuisance of a mother in those days, just an old bore. You were often heartbroken then and you never sought my advice. Why seek it now? You can scarcely expect me to take your present state of heartbreak very seriously."

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'm sorry you found me rude and ungracious. I never meant to be rude to you. I didn't know I was. I'm sorry. It was just my natural reserve, that's all, I expect. I apologize now

for any past rudeness. The fact remains that if I don't see Janet I shall go mad."

"You love her so much?"

He looked at me with great resentment. Unwillingly he answered: "Yes."

"Much more than you ever loved Helen? Answer me." I know I was very cruel. I did not mean to spare him.

"Differently."

"And more?" He nodded, and I went on. "And why do you fight all the time?"

"She is so self-sufficient, and she takes no interest in anything I do or tell her. It's all Janet, Janet, Janet. She doesn't want a man, she wants a tame puppy, someone to worship her and tell her how wonderful she is. I can't do that——"

"You don't sound very much like a man in love! Shall I tell you what I think? I think you are attributing all your own faults to her. It is *you* who are vain, you who desire constant adoration and applause. Yes, she is accustomed to appreciation; so is every woman of beauty and talent. You have criticized her until she is beginning to lose all her buoyancy and self-confidence. You don't begin to understand her. If you want her, go and find her and woo her back. She's still so much in love with you that she'll listen to you, but you'll have to use all your powers of persuasion."

"Destroying *her* self-esteem?" cried Giles. "And

what do you think she is doing to me? She's not leaving me a shred of confidence. I used to think I was quite a nice fellow, others thought so too, but now I'm self-conscious. I hardly dare open my mouth for fear she'll fly at me like a wild animal. When we dance, she tells me I don't keep time; she corrects my grammar, when I speak or write; she criticizes my manners; she tells me I'm hard and unkind and heartless. She curses me for my indolence. My God! I haven't a thing left!"

"Well, what's the attraction?"

"She's more honest and fearless than anyone I've ever met. She's sincere, she has the hardness of crystal, she's clean. She's intelligent and quick and bright. She understands everything, uncannily. She's a marvellous companion, she's warm, oh, so warm, and alive, and—she's true. I love everything she stands for, her integrity, her lack of pettiness and superficiality——" He stopped short, feeling he had said too much.

"She doesn't love you as much as that," I told him simply. "I think, however, she loves you more than you loved Helen."

"I was in love with love, then," Giles confessed. "Only I didn't know it till later. I was only a kid. As soon as I realized it, Helen and I broke up."

"Yes," I said smiling, "only you were too cowardly to tell her in plain English that you had wakened up to that fact. You beat about for excuses, finding faults in her, belittling her, until you

eased your conscience into parting with her. You hadn't the courage to belittle yourself, to confess your unwarrantable but quite comprehensible change of feeling. The damage you have done to Helen may possibly never be repaired, the inferiority complex you have given her may remain with her for ever. I don't know. I only hope not. Well, now it's your turn. Janet, of course, wasn't just in love with love. She was and still is, in love with you. If she leaves you, it is candidly to punish you. You are too casual, too aloof and self-sufficient. You need punishment and she knows it. And she loves you just enough to sacrifice her own love so that you may be punished, for until you take a hard beating, you will never, never be a man, never be worth sixpence—and she wants you to be great, because she feels you have it in you."

I thought Giles would cry. He struggled for self-mastery. At last he managed to say: "By what right are you talking to me like this? This is for Janet to tell me——"

"The same right by which you came to my house to look for her, came to me to criticize her. If you don't want to hear the truth, no one is stopping you from going.

"Oh, God!" said Giles, and bowed his head in his hands. Then he rose to go. He was utterly unhappy, at least as unhappy as Helen had been when they had parted.

And feeling that I had at least given a deserved

birching to an insufferable schoolboy, whom for years I had longed to punish, I was not sorry for him, but deeply satisfied.

We all went down to Henley that year, to the regatta, because Oliver was going to row for his college. Even James went, although of late he had been feeling far from well. He had been suffering acutely. Every now and again ulcers would break out in his stomach, and he would be terribly sick. He had just recovered from a long illness, his ulcers pronounced healed, when we left for Henley.

The second day of the races James fell ill again: I was disturbed in the night by the sound of someone moving about. I arose quickly to find James in terrible distress. As I helped him back into bed later, he whispered: "I have no pains in my stomach this time—I don't think it's the same complaint."

A doctor was called and diagnosed his case as one of acute appendicitis. An immediate operation was imperative. The following morning James was taken to the hospital.

Three weeks later James was moved to a rented house in the country. I had remained at a hotel in Henley until James could travel. Kitting and I were somewhat uneasy about James's condition upon arrival. His temperature had risen, but that we attributed to the journey.

Three days later James took a turn for the worse.

A doctor was summoned. He could tell nothing, but he feared the wound had not been properly drained. A surgeon was called in for consultation. They decided to operate again. It was late at night. The surgeon was very definite in his opinions.

James's face, lying on the pillow, emaciated and yellow-white, dear and patient, always so patient, James, so patient. . . .

Kitting limping deftly down corridors, helping the nurse tight-lipped, a heroine, helping the nurse to prepare the refectory table in the spare room for the operation, helping to clean up afterwards . . . oh, Kitting . . . !

Christopher pacing up and down the drawing room downstairs beside me, holding my hand tightly, tightly. "He'll pull through, darling, don't worry, he'll pull through. . . ."

Helen and Oliver, sitting in corners, moodily waiting—waiting.

Then the operation over, and Kitting's and the nurse's labours accomplished, having to pour brandy down the green-faced youngster.

"I could never have done that, never," vowed Helen, lost in admiration of her younger sister.

"Nor I," confessed Oliver.

"Nor I," Christopher echoed. "I can't bear—well, never mind."

Kitting pulled herself together, sipping the brandy. "Well, I couldn't very well let nurse do it

all alone, could I? It was different for you. You really couldn't bear it, but I'm hard-boiled—or thought I was. And now for another couple of hours' of waiting until Daddie-boy comes round from the anæsthetic."

"It's the smell of ether that knocks me over," said Christopher. "Ever since my own operation during the war, I'm no good."

The surgeon sat with us for a while, chatting quite cheerfully of irrelevant matters, drinking whisky and soda. He was spending the night at the local inn, and a little later he left.

We sat down there, the family and Christopher, until the dawn began to creep over the hills.

And now came that indescribable period, that spectral epoch between life and death wherein we fought for James and James did not fight for himself. An attempt to live through that period again, in all its tense horror, would be folly; moreover, it would be impossible. Its ghastliness had the nebulous quality of an evil dream: I cannot believe it really happened and that I really lived through it all. I merely recall bald facts, but no single emotion. And therefore I shall relate only facts.

James seemed to rally after the second operation. He lay there, his own smile upon his lips, enjoying his own secret—whatever it was; we never discovered. Sometimes Kitting would sit and read to him, oftener I played the piano downstairs, leaving

the doors of both rooms open. Always he smiled.

One afternoon I sat beside him, took his hand and held it. It was a long sensitive hand with filbert nails, now frail and beautiful in its physical weakness; it was a priest's hand, a dreamer's hand, one that was not born for manual labour. I loved it. I remember I could not help lifting it to my lips in homage. It was all of James, symbolizing all that I valued in him. It was gentle and noble and still, and it was not a woman's hand, for it was too large and too strong. James did not resist, but he murmured:

"My dear . . ."

"James, get well, get well." I began to cry a little.

The smile deepened. "We must not be foolish," he replied in a whisper.

I turned ice-cold. "You must try," I managed to say.

"Why?"

"You have much to do, you haven't said it all. . . ."

"I have done it all and have said what I wanted to say. I have finished. That is the end, then. To have finished is the end. I wish there could have been more money, that is all. But what with your annuity, and some of my investments, and royalties on *Corpse Mountain* from several countries, you will be all right, I think . . . and you could sell the house."

"James, James, don't talk so!" I was desperate with a sense of futility. This was a battle that could not be fought alone, and he refused to help, would make no effort to live. How could I, or any one else, fight that battle for him? The sense of defeat maddened me, horrified me. I begged him to think of us, his wife and children, pleaded as piteously as I could that he should develop a will to live. He only lay still and serene, content to leave us now that he felt he had accomplished his duties towards us.

I wept. I could not help myself. This time it was he who took my hand, feebly, patted it. He said:

"In case I never have another opportunity of thanking you, wife, let me do it now, for everything. I cannot say it all, therefore I can say nothing at all. And you must try to understand. It wasn't easy for you, our life together, I realize that. . . . That's all."

And that was all. Not in death itself did the young James return to me. *Hic jacit Jacobus* at Folkestone harbour. I cannot really go over it again; the agony of that farewell between us, that should have taken place and never did. Only later did I realize that I had hoped for too much. He never called me by my name tenderly again, he never again smiled at *me,* only at himself. With a shock I understood how earnestly I had prayed for a reunion of our spirits; I had now known myself how passionate had been my prayer. But James, since

much longer than I had suspected, had fled from our midst. Ever since his body had become a burden to him, his spirit, yearning to forsake it, had only partly remained with us. Now, at last, it triumphed in its freedom. I never understood him. Perhaps Janet understood him a little. Perhaps she conceived, with her poet's instinct, that here was a man whose tragedy lay in the fact that he was greater than his actions and nobler than his life.

I asked him: "Would it amuse you to see Janet?"

He tried to shake his head and said: "Why? The sight of me would distress her. Give her my love."

"James, but you're not going to die!" I cried.

"Not to-day, dear. And don't talk about it. It's depressing."

I was helpless. "Shall I play to you?" I asked.

"Yes. Do you think you could try that old C Minor Prelude of Bach's?"

Dear me, I had not played anything difficult for so long. I hesitated.

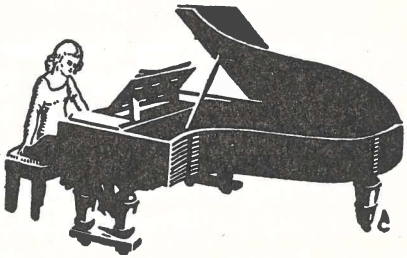
"Try."

So I struggled more or less unsuccessfully with the Bach prelude, hoping he could not, at that distance, hear how miserably I performed. It was late afternoon by now, and the sun was setting. I played it over and over, trying to retrieve my lost facility. I was sadly out of practice. When I slipped back into his room, he was dozing.

I returned to the piano and played on softly. It

was strange that he had requested that very vigorous piece: the C Minor Prelude. And yet perhaps not so strange, for in his present state of weakness such music was probably stimulating. . . . Wait! Was there perhaps a message for me in that request? My heart begins to beat at the mere thought. It has only just occurred to me. My heart beats violently as I play here to-day, hoping . . . hoping. Was he trying to convey that I should take up my music again, seriously enough to play the C Minor Prelude as well as I played it on that old gramophone record I made? And was he trying to tell me that in those last few hours, young James, who had always loved that prelude, and who had bought the record, tendered me a last shy greeting . . . ? O God, I thank Thee for this thought! I thank Thee! And I sit here and play and play and weep and weep.

In the early hours of that morning my husband passed away.



CHAPTER XIV

HELEN wanted to get married, and Oliver wanted to live in a bachelor flat, and Kitting to be free and to live her own life. And there were death duties and things, and the house really needed repairing, and it was too big for me alone. Moreover, I had always craved freedom, so what with one thing and another (but mostly because I was not very rich) the house was put up for sale.

Such a strange feeling: to have my home for sale. Just a tiny bit like asking me to die a little. Christopher says it is all wrong, all nonsense, and it was high time it stopped, this mother-and-home business. I think he must be right. Only Janet has cried. She has cried almost as much over the house as she did over the news of James's death, and that was a great deal. At one time I thought she would die too, because of James. She regretted wildly, fiercely, not having seen him to say farewell. Her agonizingly sharp regret made her ill. Two months after James's passing she went into a nursing home with a nervous breakdown. Giles contrived to see her there. He was jumpy and nervous with his unhappy love for

her, tormented by his uncertainty of her love for him. When he saw her lying there white and listless he grew frightened, and even the remote possibility of losing her through death drove him back to me with another plea for my intercession.

"It's my fault she's ill!" he cried. "I've upset her!" I looked at him intently; then it occurred to me to tell him the truth:

"She's ill because she is so unhappy about my husband's passing. He was her mentor, her great friend and teacher: she worshipped him. Perhaps she is a little afraid without him, not for her life but for her thoughts and her work. No doubt she was upset because of you, but it was my husband's death that caused her breakdown."

It was difficult to explain to Giles that there could be such a love as the one between James and Janet. Things, emotions, and feelings were always black or white to Giles. I very much doubted, although I did not tell him so, whether Janet would ever return to him. And yet it appeared that Giles accepted Janet's sorrow over James. He suffered deeply, could not understand quite clearly how Janet could love him too; but perforce he accepted her mourning. Poor Giles, it was sad to see him. I was sorry now. Yet I did not try to comfort him: one could not try to comfort Giles, and therein, I think, lay his tragedy: he was not sufficiently human to accept any sympathy, even in his sorrow, too distant

and unapproachable for friendship. We sat, looking at each other without speaking. I thought the silence would last forever, and I felt I could not bear it. His silence was obstinate, hopeless, and sullen. Finally I said: "Well?"

He shrugged his shoulders. After a few more seconds he rose and held out his hand. "Good-bye," he said, sighing. "I suppose I can go and drown myself. It's all over. It was inevitable from the first that Janet and I should part like this. I hung on as long as I could, hoping when it was hopeless. Janet just doesn't love me, that's all. It's a bitter pill, God knows, damn bitter, but I've got to swallow it even if it chokes me."

"Janet does love you in her way."

"She did love me, but I've lost her, God knows how. Not through my own fault, for I don't see what I've done."

"Asked for too much," I answered.

"Perhaps it was that. Now I'd be ready to do anything and change anything, but it's too late. Janet doesn't love me any more."

"Don't say that. Janet is the one person who loves forever; once she has given her affection she is incapable of taking it back."

"That isn't good enough," said Giles stiffly. "Good-bye."

And so we parted, and I knew that Janet lay in her nursing home, lonely and suffering and hurt by

her love for Giles, but proud to have punished him, and free at last.

I never saw Giles again, except once or twice in public.

To-day Giles is forging ahead in New York as one of its most promising theatrical scenic designers. Janet's odd punishment has had the desired effect, and no one has heard his name coupled with that of any other woman.

While Christopher and Kitting worked grimly on, and Janet slowly recovered from her two tragedies, Oliver spent his last term at Oxford. Sometimes Babs would shyly come to the house for tea, and, appearing obviously constrained and uncomfortable, sit and nibble sandwiches between sentences about the exploits of her dog or her prowess at golf or the new length for skirts or shade for finger nails. Odd that when Helen or Janet discussed these subjects they took on colour, were expressive of the mood of our times, had significance; but with Babs they meant only what they seemed to mean and, I must confess, were dull to me. Poor little Babs. She was only really happy or at ease when in the society of her contemporaries. She made me feel an elderly lady, and my presence made her feel a child. I suppose she came to see me because I was Oliver's mother. Like a sweet dog she had in her own mind attached herself to my son, almost without consulting him. She never got in his way or made any

demands; she merely lay at his feet and wagged a tail when he appeared. She adored him but never mentioned it.

Oliver came down from Oxford and entered the firm of Peabody & Hootes, which was a great piece of luck for him. He did not go out dancing these days, but he and Babs played tennis, and, together with Helen and Jack, they played bridge and golf on Sundays. Oliver did not trust her, and he did not see why he should: she was a decent kid, and he liked her, and he never led her on, only accepted her worship—and her worship of him was her own affair. She was welcome to it, if it made her happy. So felt Oliver.

That was all very well, but early one morning Oliver came into my room while I was still in bed, wearing a puzzled frown and holding a letter.

"Mum," he said, "I want your advice."

"You flatter me!" I laughed. "It isn't often that a member of the younger generation comes for advice to one of his elders!"

"Don't be flippant, Mother, this is serious. It's about Babs."

"Oh."

"Yes. Er—yes."

"Well, Oliver, out with it."

Oliver subsided on the edge of the bed and immediately became a distressed little boy. "Well," he explained, "the poor kid's awfully fond of me. I

know that's nothing new, but—er—she never sort of said so until now. Well, now the cat's out of the bag, I'm not quite sure what I'm going to do. She's up in Scotland, and she's absolutely miserable. She's awfully lonely, too. She's had 'flu and I think it's made her a bit cuckoo. . . ."

"How?"

"Oh, well, she's got a sort of obsession that I'm not . . . that I'm . . . that I don't care for her any more."

"But did you ever care?"

"Oh, you know what I mean. Sort of. I've never made a fool of myself, but I've never wanted to make her miserable. And now she's in an awful stew. And all on account of . . . well, on account of, who on earth d'you think?" He began to chuckle.

"I think I can guess," I said.

"You're right. On account of Janet, of all people. Janet! Would you believe it? Well, I've got to write to her and clear that up."

"What are you going to say?"

"Oh, that it's all rot: about Janet, I mean, and about herself and me too. I shall write and tell her not to make a fool of herself."

"Be careful," said I.

"Of what?"

"Don't be obtuse. Babs adores you. Don't break her heart."

"Oh, rot!" exclaimed Oliver airily, and started

to reread the letter he held. I watched his face and found it wore an exceedingly perplexed expression.

The upshot of the whole matter was that a few days later Babs came to London from Scotland. She came to me, not to Oliver. She arrived before breakfast, and so she, too, found me in bed. As soon as she had received Oliver's reply to her letter she had packed and run away. She could not afford a sleeper, and had sat up all night. The 'flu had left her pale and much thinner, and she was worn out with fatigue and worry.

"I wanted to talk to you," she said, restraining her tears with difficulty, "because I think you understand. You see, Oliver and I have been friends for years now, and I was always in love with him. And I used to . . . to hope . . ." Here her voice broke, and she wiped her eyes; but pulling herself together she went on bravely: ". . . and lately, I really thought he loved me. When . . . when his father died he wrote me an awfully nice letter saying how much my friendship meant, and I was so happy. And now suddenly he seems to have got tired of me or something. I can't make it out."

"I don't know what to say," I told her. "As Oliver's mother I'm in an exceedingly difficult position. All I know is that for some time now it has been apparent that your devotion to Oliver has exceeded his to you. . . ."

"Oh, no, no!" cried Babs, her eyes growing round

with surprise, "that isn't so! That's just the point. He's never been really casual: that was just his manner in front of people. Honestly it was. I *know,* you see. But lately, he's changed. Oh, I was sure you knew it was only his manner. . . ."

"No, I did not." I did not know whether or not I believed Babs, and I was faced with the fact that a mother does not necessarily know her own son. Evidently Babs was sincere. It was only his manner. Perhaps he had received her out of pity. Again he may have loved Babs at first sight and ever since his late schooldays. Elaborately he may have concealed his devotion to her from me. Anything seemed possible. It was most bewildering.

"You're quite sure?" I asked.

"Yes, quite. That is, he always said so. He told me he was in love with me a long time ago, but of course we were much too young to marry, so neither of us ever said anything to anyone. But now, you see, it's a bit different——"

"He is still too young to marry," I demurred.

"Oh, I know; but I mean he *is* independent and he *has* got a job, hasn't he? And we *could* be engaged, I mean——"

"Why?" I returned, a trifle impatient now. "Moreover, *must* you talk to me about it? Why don't you tackle Oliver, not me? You young people amaze me. You're all the same. You go your own sweet ways and brook no interference until you

come up against a difficulty; but the minute you are faced with a problem you toddle back to the grown-ups for help. What am I supposed to say to you, Babs? I don't know my cue. Do you really want to know what I think?"

Babs' round eyes filled with tears again. "Yes," she said.

"Very well, Babs. I think all this talk of marriage is utter nonsense. You are both too young. Oliver must get a chance of finding his feet, you of meeting other young men. Also I think engagements are just nonsense, neither one thing nor the other. As long as they are unmarried people should be free and untied, not labelled and hampered and a bore to their friends, I think you and Oliver should go on as before, making no demands upon each other. In any case, Oliver is still a minor. Probably I am prejudiced, as Oliver is my own son. You could hardly expect me to be otherwise. . . ."

Babs gazed at me miserably. Then she said: "I see what you mean, but that's not what's worrying me. I'm feeling so upset because I think Oliver's changing towards me."

"If I am to continue being frank, I may be permitted to say that I think you are probably frightening Oliver by pursuing him——"

"Oh, but I'm not!"

"Oh, but you are. He is made uncomfortable by the feeling that you are simply waiting for him to

fix the date of your wedding. A man likes to feel free. He probably thinks: 'Oh, Gawd, I expect she wants me to declare my intentions,' so he is scared, and his present state of bachelorhood suddenly seems eminently something to hang on to."

"I see," she replied, then added simply: "But I just *can't* pretend with Oliver. I love him, and I'll always love him, and I'll never marry anyone else. I suppose I'm stupid, but I can't help it. I've always been stupid. Daddie always said so, you know. It's no use pretending to Oliver that I don't want him, it's too late for that. He knows all about me."

For a moment I thought her rather wonderful. Her steadfastness and loyalty were unusual. "That's all right," I said, "but you shouldn't change your tactics by trying to make him declare himself."

"I see," she replied humbly.

That evening Oliver turned up for dinner. I told him that Babs was in town and had been to see me.

"You're in love with her," I stated. He did not reply, but looked embarrassed and a little vexed with me for what he considered prying.

I told him that Babs looked ill and had travelled down in great discomfort and was very unhappy. Then I told him what she had said about being engaged and married.

"Did you ever mention marriage to her?"

"Well, sort of, a longish time ago."

"And you never said anything to me about it. Oh! Oliver. All I ever heard was 'no nonsense.' "

"Well, it was 'no nonsense.' I never dreamt she'd start champing at the bit and fidgeting. It was just between ourselves, and now the little nit-wit has to get the wind up and blab."

"Oliver, stop being noncommittal with me. I deserve better treatment at your hands. Tell me whether Babs is justified in believing that your attitude towards her has changed."

"Of course she isn't. I haven't changed. That's all rot. Stop worrying, Mum. It's all right. All she needs is a talking-to, and I'm going to give it to her."

"Do you want to marry her?"

"Oh, Lord, not *now*. Some day probably. She's a nice kid, really, you know, and there doesn't seem anyone else much more suitable, so when I'm a hoary old man full of money, and she's a wrinkled old hag, we'll probably take the plunge."

They are still where they were, and at the time of writing, have not yet "taken the plunge," but I expect they will, sooner or later.

Christopher and Kitting laboured on quietly, unobtrusively, through the entire year. Kitting, to whom the passing of her father came as a terrible blow, threw herself more deeply than ever into her work. She was seriously beginning to attract the attention of established scientists, and I realized

now that my youngest daughter was a prodigy, and that she was regarded by many as someone of future importance. Latterly she had made strides; Christopher was now more disciple than teacher, and watched developments in their joint laboratory with bated breath, in silent admiration. I did not see so much of her, she was too busy, and I saw equally little of Christopher; but one day Kitting came home early for tea. We were alone together for the first time in many years. She took a cigarette from a box by the tea table, sat down on the sofa, put up her weak leg on a chair, and began to smoke. She looked at the brand of the cigarette between her fingers (long, sensitive fingers, with flat, square tips, a trifle stained, with unpolished nails) and then into the fire. I guessed what she saw in the flames, for her eyes grew suddenly moist. Cool, intelligent, bright blue eyes, direct and challenging, now clouded by memories.

"So much has got to go," she mused aloud, "and every wrench is an agony. We build houses, families, friends, things, and then we leave them, we die a hundred deaths. Every little thing, a cigarette of the brand one's father smoked, a room one's lover first entered, in attaining significance, causes pain at its end. Human emotion, human pain, is expended at one's creation, one's birth, and therefore emotion attends one's decease. That is right. What is precious and bought at great cost is hard to lose.

What is built out of one's body or soul is infinitely dear. I wonder whether I shall live to see the day when people will not die a hundred deaths by being sincerely unattached? I mean unattached without sacrifice. So long as children are torn out of the bodies of live women and begotten in emotion by men, there will be the death I describe, the attachments that lift us skyward and cast us, alternately, into hell. When Haldane's ectogenetic experiments really bear fruit, and the price of birth is not one of human emotion but of scientific calculation, then and then only will the home and the family give way completely to communism."

"How glad will you be, dear Kitting?"

"Glad only, dear Mother, in so far as women who are as good as you are will be spared grief such as yours, giving up their houses and being deserted by their children."

"And spared the joy, too, remember. You know 'Tis better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all.' Very mushy and trite, darling, but annoyingly true, and I like being deserted."

"Liar. You're just being plucky. What's more, I don't believe that 'loved and lost' business. I could counter that quotation with another of those sops: 'What the something doesn't know, the something doesn't hanker after'—or however it goes. You simply *can't* trot out those convenient quotations, darling. Nobody pays any attention to them."

"Would you have preferred not to have had a home to lose, Kitting, than all this upset over leaving this house?" Kitting said: "No." Then she said: "I love it, and it's all tied up with my whole life, almost as much as with yours, as far as my poor little life goes. With Daddie and Christopher." She gave me a look, then went on, as casually as she could: "You know about Christopher and me, I suppose?"

"Darling, I'm not blind."

"Well, it's becoming a damn nuisance and I'm afraid we'd better get married——"

"What?" I sat bolt upright.

"Yes, isn't it a bore? Such a useless rigmarole, but we might as well. There we are for hours and hours together, working and laughing into the early hours of the dawn sometimes, whole nights through, then having to go to separate homes just when we reach the most interesting part of a discussion only to keep appearances."

"Kitting, what on earth are you talking about? Marriage isn't *discussions!* It's bed and breakfast and work and play——"

"Darling!" She removed her leg from the chair, rose, and came over to me, took both my hands in hers, and said earnestly: "But, my sweet love, Christopher and I have all that already, only it's such a nuisance being interrupted all the time. Besides, to tell you the truth, we're both so romantic that hav-

ing to part at the wrong moments upsets a lot—it's so *unromantic!*" I don't know what I must have looked like, but she suddenly stooped and kissed both my hands. "Darling," she said, "you mustn't be shocked or upset. You see we are of another day and age, and we're really awfully moral and highly principled. According to my code it would have been indecent of me not to have been his mate. Indecent. Can't you understand? There we were, working together, absolutely in harmony. If we'd been conventionally moral, chastity would have begun to breed a maggot, a sickly, morbid worm of sex-consciousness that would have gnawed at us both and undermined our lovely fellowship. As it is sex between us is a joyous and complete fulfilment of our union. We can be happy together and get on with our job."

"Christopher——" I began but she interrupted me.

"No, Christopher did *not* 'take advantage of an innocent young girl.' We had it all out, and we both have faith in what we did. Christopher's all right. And now we'd better marry."

I recovered from my stupor. The word "marry" galvanized me into action. I almost leapt to my feet.

"Marry!" I echoed. "No, not that! Not again! Not the whole of my life over again, with variations! Anything but that! You, child, you don't know what marriage is to women like us. It's bed and

breakfast and babies and servants and shopping and vacuum cleaners and fires and flues and punctual meals and a hundred trivial, all-important duties. It is unlearning all you ever knew in order to learn the almighty science of making a home and background for a man and children, putting your mind in a trunk and forgetting it. It's being left high and dry when you've just become perfect in that science and finding that the mind you've so carefully kept in a trunk is full of moth holes. I, like you, had a career of my own once. I married a dear good man. Then you children came, and his work became more important than mine, and I found myself slipping. I slipped. That life is now over, and I ought to have my music to fall back upon. Well, I haven't. I'm rusty. Serious work can't be treated like that, it can't be put aside, regarded as a hobby and an amusement and then go back to being the most important thing in one's life. Don't do the same, Kitting, don't, I implore you. Don't marry. Not till much, much later, when your career is established. For God's sake, profit by my example. Let my life be an example to you. I cannot forgive Christopher, much as I know that he means well. It's all right for Helen to marry, for Babs—even for girls like Janet, who have no actual careers; but not for your kind, Kitting, who give everything they have to what they are doing, who go straight and refuse to make a mess."

I began to cry, and Kitting flung her arms about me. She, too, began to cry at my distress.

"Hush, hush, Mother darling. You're so wrong about me. Christopher isn't Daddie. He's not as brilliant as Daddie; and I'm not you, not as sweet nor as gentle. It'll be all right, I promise. Let us be, and don't be unhappy. Christopher and I do the same work, and we have to sink and swim together. He's utterly lost without me, even if I do say it, and I need him too. We're a kind of Adam and Eve, no good without the other in our creation! Oh, my poor, dear sweet, what a hell of a life you've had, my poor, darling Mummie-girl! And I never knew, I never realized it, never!"

"Only one person ever understood."

"I know," said Kitting, blowing her nose loudly. "I know, of course." She stopped suddenly, then took me into her arms again. "Oh, my darling, my only Mummie, I'm so proud of you. I know who understood, I know."

Decency. Decency to James. Indecency. Decency to Christopher. Principle. Chastity. Dear Christopher, what do you want? Things like that just don't happen to women like me. I am married to an excellent husband, and am the mother of three delightful children. Freedom, all my life I have longed for freedom, and now I've got it.

Janet M—— helped me to unpack here in this little hotel. She has been very sweet to me. She was

particularly adorable on that cold Thursday when the new tenants took over the house and I gave up the keys. It was awful handing over the keys to the new tenants—to the new mistress. Janet led me away from the front door after that, into the waiting taxi, in complete silence, but the tears rained unrestrainedly down her brown cheeks all the way here. "The house is only a skeleton now," she said.

In about a week's time I am leaving for Italy for the winter. I have just received the following note from Janet:

"I've never had a family, darling, so may I adopt you? You're all I have, and I don't need you, only I adore your company. Aren't you about sick of being needed? Oh, darling, you are so sweet and gentle and brave. I said a prayer for you: I thanked God for you and asked Him to bless you 'and all good mothers like Elsa,' I said, and 'please God let me be a daughter to her, for I've never been a daughter to nobody.' May I go with you to Italy? In the words of Ruth:

'Entreat me not to leave thee or to return from following thee, for whither thou goest I will go, where thou lodgest I will lodge, thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God.'"